Why Is Bob Herbert Boring?

Washington MONTHLY

SPECIAL HEALTH CARE ISSUE

TWO BOLD IDEAS TO LOWER COSTS, IMPROVE QUALITY, & COVER EVERYBODY

THE MYTH OF AL-QAEDA IN IRAQ

BY ANDREW TILGHMAN

OCTOBER 2007
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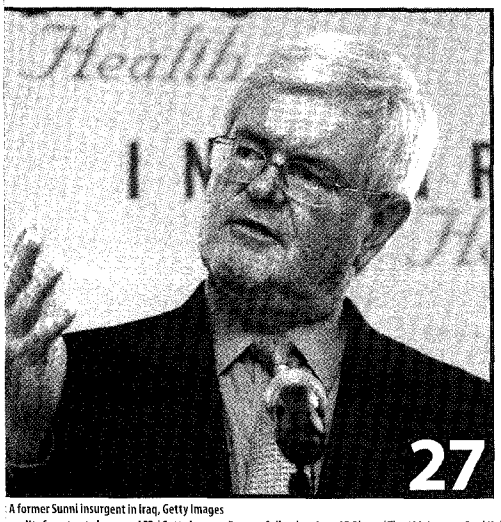

A former Sunni insurgent in Iraq, Getty Images
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Editor's Note

PAUL GLASTRIS

Groundhog Day

I know it's the Twenty-first Century, and the World Is Flat, and 9/11 Changed Everything. But when I look at the big issues facing the nation—rising health care costs and declining coverage; stagnant wages and growing income inequality; war and instability in the Middle East; our dangerous overreliance on oil—what I see is not the dawn of a new day but Groundhog Day. These issues are pretty much the same ones that dominated the headlines when I got into the journalism business a quarter century ago.

The enduring nature of our problems could mean three things. It could mean that the problems themselves are irresolvable, though I'd hate to think—in fact generally don't think—that's true. Or it could mean that old ways of thinking have failed and we need an entirely fresh approach, a new paradigm—though I have not come across any persuasive new paradigms lately.

Or there is a third option: that our public officials are not complete idiots, that over the years many of them have given a great deal of thought to these problems, and that they have fashioned promising solutions that are sitting in the government's toolbox waiting to be fully deployed.

Consider the dilemma of rising health care costs. When this issue was heating up twenty years ago, the Democratic Congress and the first Bush administration created the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research (AHCPR). The agency's mandate was to look at existing clinical studies and (it was hoped) fund new ones to determine which medicines, devices, and treatments work best and which are a waste of money. AHCPR was then supposed to use this knowledge to advise Medicare about what to pay for and what not to. Had the agency been allowed to do its job, the nation might now be spending countless billions less on health care. But as Shannon Brownlee explains this month (see "Newtered," page 27), antigovernment ideologues in the Gingrich House, egged on by health care industry lobbyists, managed to get much of AHCPR's funding and authority stripped out. Today, probably the single best way to lower health care costs and improve quality would be to create a beefed-up version of AHCPR. And indeed, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John Edwards have all announced plans to do just that.

Or take the issue of the uninsured. As Phil Longman argues elsewhere in this issue (see "Best Care Everywhere," page 21), we already have an ad hoc system that serves those who lack coverage: local public and charitable hospitals and clinics. Though woefully underfunded, these institutions, Longman demonstrates, provide surprisingly good care. What's needed, he says, is to rope them together into a loose but effective national network. And, it turns out, the federal government already runs a national system that can serve as a model—one that delivers, according to numerous studies, excellent health care at a relatively low price: the VA.

Then there's the mess in Iraq. General David Petraeus is now pursuing a counterinsurgency strategy that was lifted from books sitting on war college library shelves written years ago by warrior-scholars who served in Vietnam. Petraeus's counterinsurgency strategy may be too little, too late, and he may be peddling faulty intelligence (see "The Myth of AQI," page 34). But there's general agreement that we'd be in much better shape today if we'd pursued a serious counterinsurgency strategy early in the conflict. And if there is any hope of getting out of Iraq without leaving genocide and regional war in our wake, it probably involves using international negotiating strategies that were successfully field-tested by U.S. and UN diplomats in places like Bosnia and East Timor.

I don't mean to suggest that every warmed-over policy idea from the past is worth resurrecting, or that fresh thinking isn't needed. Longman's proposal for a civilian VA for the uninsured, though based on existing institutions, counts, I think, as a truly novel idea. The point is that because most of our big problems are of long duration, it shouldn't be a surprise that most of the solutions have been around a while, too.

This poses a political dilemma. In his new book *The Argument*, Matt Bai tells the story of the outside-the-Beltway liberal activists—bloggers, MoveOn members, billionaire funders—who in the last few years have been challenging establishment Democrats to stiffen their spine and win back power. As part of that effort, the activists have been trying to come up on their own with a fresh vision and dramatic new agenda for Democrats to run on. But the book ends with the activists—and the author—frustrated at their inability to do so. "Maybe that should tell us something," writes Kevin Drum in his review of Bai's book (see "What's the Big Idea?," page 43).

What it should tell us is that our hunger for bold new ideas may be leading us astray. What we really should be looking for are leaders with the knowledge and wisdom to select, from a vast cabinet of potential tools, precisely the right ones, and the political skills and determination to actually get the job done. That might not sound like the most inspiring of challenges. But it may be what the times demand. WM

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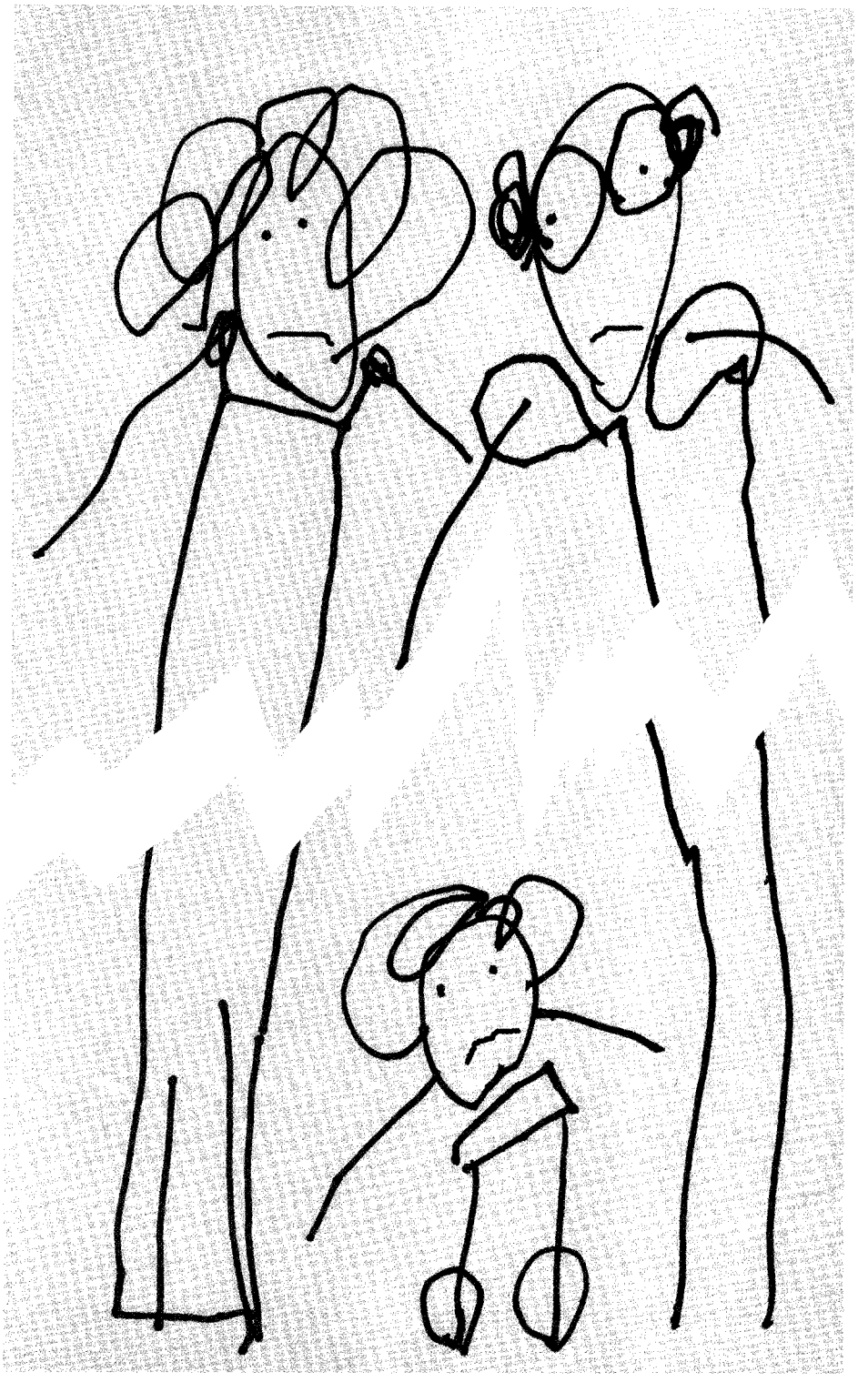

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Hundreds of thousands of American-born children lose their *mom or dad* to detention and deportation.

FACT
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Hear, hear

I want to thank Ted Sorensen for his courage and willingness to produce a speech this country desperately needs ("The New Vision," July/August). He did so once before, in the days of my parents, at a time when America was aching for a message of hope and action rather than fear and division, and he has done so again now. Unfortunately, I see very few of the candidates as willing to deliver this piece.

Still, I am trying to remain optimistic. We do have candidates today who have the potential not just to stand up and say what is written by Mr. Sorensen, but to truly commit to the principles and ideals embedded in these words. However, these candidates—although intelligent, wealthy, and accomplished—are no more than what the American public makes of them. Until we the people call for this speech and all it embodies, nothing will happen. Thank you, Mr. Sorensen, for reminding us what we as a people and a country are capable of.

Alec Chiquoine
Via e-mail

Ted Sorensen's "New Vision" is one of the most beautiful, thoughtful pieces I have read in years. It almost brought me to tears for its honesty and lucidity. Sorensen said what has been missing from Democratic candidates for many years: a forthright appraisal of the United States and the world that everyone can understand without consideration of "expediency or tactics."

But when Sorensen wrote "I intend to serve all the people, regardless of party, race, region, or religion," was he not being a little expedient? Should not the president also serve all the people regardless of gender and sexual orientation? This is 2007, not 1960. Ted lost me by expedient omission.

Richard C. Sachs
New York, NY

Unhealthy obsession

Ezra Klein says that the states are "structurally incapable" of sustaining health care programs because of their vulnerability to recessions and inability to run deficits ("Over Stated," July/August). Yes, some state programs have failed for fiscal reasons, but most were based on the unstable ground of insurance providers. So did the programs collapse, or the foundation under them? Klein also fails to address the case of European countries that have maintained successful programs.

In fact, states are better suited to do the heavy political lifting needed for universal coverage to succeed. Unlike Congress, states don't need to contend with filibusters. Additionally, state legislators are less insulated from their constituents than congressional lawmakers are. It seems a bit ironic for Klein to look to Congress to solve the problem. After all, every federal attempt at universal coverage over the past eighty years has failed spectacularly.

In addition to ignoring this federal failure, Klein also manages to ignore the states' successes. In just the last fifteen years, state-run programs have added at least 20 million people who were previously without coverage. Combined, state programs cover more Americans than Medicare.

The states are also learning from each other's struggles. In New York, children's coverage was expanded to 400 percent of the poverty level using the joint state-federal SCHIP (State Children's Health Insurance Program), providing all but universal children's care. Countless other states are raising their SCHIP coverage levels as well.

The boldest plan yet comes from Wisconsin, which circumvents the flawed insurance premium system altogether by instituting payroll-based funding. The plan would cover all residents not already covered by public programs, and would provide comprehensive coverage with no premiums and low copays. The plan is estimated to save $1.3 billion a year while generating $1 billion in new business activity.

Securing universal health care will need effort at every level. The federal government is particularly well suited to a funding role, which would distribute the risk of individual states' deficits. On the other hand, state implementation of programs circumvents the political gridlock in D.C. and can offer programs more tailored to residents' needs. Is it really wise to put all our eggs in the federal basket?

Adam Thompson
Senior Health Policy Specialist
Progressive States Network

Ezra Klein responds:

Mr. Thompson conducts something of a bait and switch in the first paragraph of his fine letter. Within three sentences, he's moved from discussing the states to European nations, which imbue their systems with federal powers, a model I believe the U.S. should emulate. Mr. Thompson then focuses on state success in the form of ... Medicaid and SCHIP, both federal programs.

I sympathize with his plight, though. I do not dispute the political failures at the federal level. But the many political successes at the state level have failed to create even one working universal program (which was the subject of my article), while the many political failures at the federal level do not obviate the fact that reformers need only succeed once. My point is that now is the time to fight for that one success.

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TILTING *at windmills*

By Charles Peters

The trap

Senator Carl Levin recently added his voice to those demanding the removal of Nouri al-Maliki as Iraq's prime minister. This worries me, because Levin is one of the most respected Democrats in the Senate, and he has set a trap for himself. If al-Maliki is replaced, Levin will have to give the new leadership a fair chance to produce. This will mean extending American involvement in the war. The problem is that there is no Iraqi leader in sight who is clearly more likely than al-Maliki to bring about the needed reforms. The only chance I see of these reforms is an American pullout schedule that will scare the Iraqi parliament into getting off the dime. Regardless of what we do, Iraq is more likely than not to face a chaotic next few years. So the only sensible course for us is to keep more of our soldiers from being killed or maimed.

Those of us old enough to remember will recall the one plausible excuse after another offered by the Johnson and Nixon administrations for staying in Vietnam: give the new government a chance; give new military tactics a chance; provide time for the South Vietnamese army to get up to speed. And all this accomplished was to prolong the misery for our troops.

Give me a break

You probably have heard by now about how executives of "private equity" firms like Blackstone and the Fortress Investment Group have been getting away with paying just 15 percent of their earnings in taxes instead of the 35 percent paid by others of similar income. Since there is no justification for the tax break, with some members of Congress proposing to end it and even a conservative like Ben Stein finding himself unable to defend it, you would think the private equity executives would admit that they should pay what other people pay.

> To call the total D.C. school bureaucracy "bloated" is to venture to the far shores of understatement.

After all, as Stein points out in his *New York Times* column, "What possible difference can it make to Steven Schwartzman, the chief executive at Blackstone, if he makes $400 million or, say, $350 million a year?"

Such reasoning has, however, failed to commend itself to the private equity profiteers. Just one firm, Blackstone, has paid $3.74 million to the lobbying firm Ogilvy Government Relations to save the break. And that's just in the first six months of this year, which, according to the *Washington Post*'s Jeffrey Birnbaum, makes it "the heftiest six-month payment to any lobbyist ever reported."

Peter's principles

Ironically, you will recall that Peter Peterson, one of the eminences of Blackstone, made his reputation as a deficit hawk. His take, when Blackstone went public last year, was $1.88 billion. My former colleague Michael Kinsley observes in *Time*: "Here was an opportunity for statesmanship that you would have thought Peterson would be unable to resist. Like Warren Buffet and Bill Gates Sr., he could be the rich man who speaks truth to the other rich folks about the need to pay their taxes."

Thus far, Peterson has found himself able to resist the mantle of statesmanship. Remember that the next time you see him pontificating about the deficit.

Carrie vs. Kerouac

An interesting point is made in the new book *Deluxe*. Its author, Diane Thomas, explains how the distaste for luxury that had been a product of the cultural revolution of the 1960s had ended by the 1980s.

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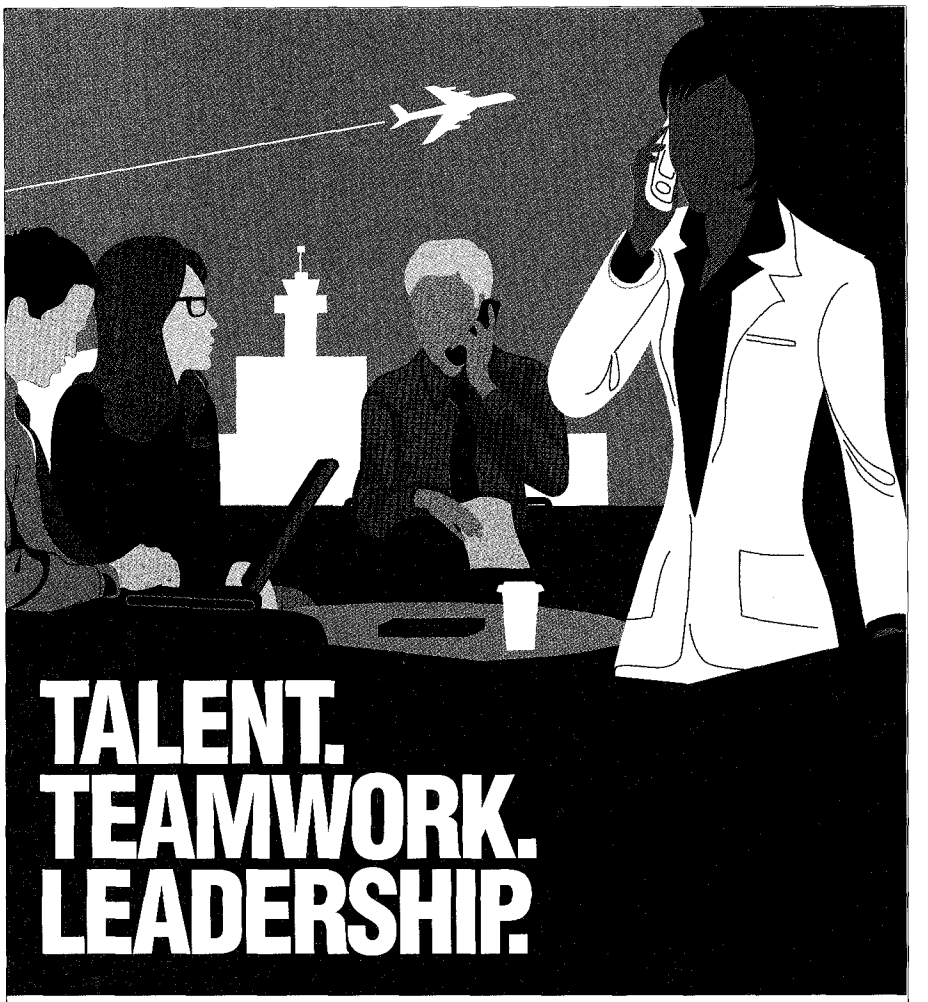
Among the factors she mentions are the obvious ones of the growth of disposable income and the increasingly easy adjustment to credit card debt—and a not so obvious one. It is that "a new and financially powerful demographic, the unmarried female executive, emerged in the 1980s." Anyone who watched *Sex and the City*, as I'm embarrassed to admit I did regularly, knows that Thomas is onto something.

The thrust of her book is a different matter, however. It is hinted at by the subtitle, "How Luxury Lost Its Luster." Her lament is that the quality and craftsmanship of luxury goods has been compromised and cheapened by the pursuit of a mass market composed of folks who "used to know their place" but now have "a craving for the goods but not enough dough for the genuine thing." It's almost as if she is complaining that the participation in the mass market of all those sweaty people means that it's not just for us anymore.

My lament is that I hated to see Carrie, the leading character in *Sex and the City*, trivialized by her fixation on Manolo Blahniks and her being besotted with the rich guy riding around in his limousine. The problem is that the taste for luxury means that you must acquire a lot of money—in other words, that you're in danger of becoming greedy. I've always subscribed to a lesson taught by Jack Kerouac: your chances of having a good life are considerably enhanced if you keep your overhead low.

And they're falling behind on their polo lessons too

Not long ago I saw a column by Steven Stark of the *Boston Phoenix* cautioning Barack Obama about coming across as an elitist and urging him to show that he enjoys a beer with the guys. Then, while channel hopping, I happened to turn to an MSNBC interview of Obama by Tim Russert. During a discussion of the sacrifices campaigning required of parents and their children, Obama remarked, "I hate to miss one of their ballet recitals or soccer games."



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Incompetence: a textbook case

As the D.C. schools prepared to open, the big question was whether the textbooks would arrive on time. The official responsible is Donald Winstead.

A couple of matters of interest. He is the entire staff of the school's textbook department. One person. You have to wonder why the textbook department is so understaffed, especially when to call the total D.C. school bureaucracy "bloated" is to venture to the far shores of understatement.

Then there is the question of how those who gave Winstead his daunting responsibility determined that he had the necessary aptitude. They must have been seeking to plow new ground in the realm of personnel management, because they gave Winstead the assignment even though he failed at the same task several years ago. He had actually been manager of the textbook department before, from July 1998 to July 2000, according to Greg Emerling of the *Washington Times*.

In 2000, however, he was fired. Why? Because "books were not delivered to the schools on time."

Undefeated

My friend, the *Washington Post*'s Colbert King, recently wrote something about this bureaucracy—its official title is the central office of the D.C. public schools—that is so dead-on I must give it to you verbatim:

> *Through the years the central office has done terrifying deeds to public education. It has kept schools from opening on time, swallowed repair orders by the thousands, made teachers' paychecks disappear, consumed tax dollars by the millions without producing any discernible results, and ultimately acquired a well-deserved reputation for treating schoolchildren as if they are nuisances.*
>
> *But the central office's chief enemy, for whom its most hostile behavior is reserved, is the reform-minded superintendent. In the battle against change, the central office ... remains undefeated.*

When bureaucracies go bad ...

Lest the reader too quickly dismiss the central office as just another example of the incompetence that has been the hallmark of the D.C. city government for many years, I hasten to remind him that the same tendencies, if not carried to such ridiculous lengths, are common to all bureaucracies, which is why they must always be scrutinized by the press and the public.

What happens is that bureaucracies gradually tend to turn from initial dedication to the performance of their mission to a dedication to their own comfort, meaning a preoccupation with job security, promotions, and pay raises, and the avoidance of accountability of any kind. Similarly, private corporations tend to change from an early excitement about the new product or service they offer, to concern about enriching their executives regardless of the cost to public health and safety, fair competition, and their obligation to pay taxes.

So whenever anyone offers either a blanket defense or a blanket condemnation of the government or the market, be skeptical, and point out that both can be good, but you better keep your eye on them.

> I hated to see Carrie trivialized by her fixation on Manolo Blahniks and her being besotted with the rich guy riding around in his limousine.

... and corporations get greedy

A recent example of the need to scrutinize both the corporations and the government comes from Crandall Canyon, Utah, where three miners were killed while searching for six of their trapped comrades, who themselves are now deemed lost. Their employer, Murray Energy, had sought and received approval from the Mine Health and Safety Administration to do a kind of mining that was, to put it simply, too dangerous.

The Murray mine had been abandoned by its previous owner, who had concluded that all the coal that could be safely removed had been mined. But Murray decided it could still get coal from the "pillars" that held up the roof of the mine and the "barriers" that separated its sections.

This method, called "retreat mining," can be done prudently if the mine is near the surface. But in this case Murray was seeking to extract coal from 1,500 feet under a mountain of rock. It was a reckless project that Murray was wrong to undertake, and MHSA was wrong to approve.

Public policy and Abramoff's pal

Another Bush concession to the coal industry was predicted by John Broder of the *New York Times* as we were going to press. It will allow mountaintop removal not only to continue but to expand.

Mountaintop removal is not always bad. My hometown of Charleston, West Virginia, would not have an airport without it. But far too often, it results in barren landscapes and streams filled with debris. It should not be done without careful regulation, with tough penalties for companies that fail to protect the environment. Interestingly enough, one of the original sponsors of Bush's loosening of the restrictions on mountaintop removal was none other than J. Steven Griles, who earlier this summer was sentenced to prison for his role in the Abramoff corruption scandal. Griles previously was a lobbyist for—you'll never guess—the coal industry.

The poor standards of Standard & Poor's

The *Wall Street Journal* has done a good job of nailing Wall Street's role in the sub-prime scandal. Last month I mentioned its article about Lehman Brothers'

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involvement. Now comes "How Rating Firms' Calls Fueled the Sub Prime Mess," by Aaron Lucchetti and Serena Ng, which reveals that respected organizations like Moody's Investor Service and Fitch Ratings "gave top ratings to many securities built on the questionable loans."

Perhaps most shocking of all, the article tells about a crucial bad call by Standard & Poor's in 2000. It declared that a piggyback mortgage was "no more likely to default" than a standard mortgage. In case you do not know what a piggyback mortgage is, it is a mortgage on top of a mortgage in which the borrower receives not only a regular loan for his house but a loan to cover the down payment as well. It doesn't take much common sense to realize that S&P forgot, in the midst of the sub-prime frenzy, that the ability to make a reasonable down payment is a good sign that a borrower will be able to repay the loan. The reverse is even more true—that the inability to make the down payment should inspire doubt about the borrower's ability to repay.

The alternative to regulation

One lesson I love to teach is to people who profess scorn for government regulation. It's best taught to the fellow sitting next to you on the plane who wants to get the government off his back. I like to ask, "Would you really like to have a government less concerned with airline safety? Wouldn't that increase the chances that this plane will crash and we will die a fiery death instead of going home to our families in a few hours?" Now, thanks to Daniel Michaels of the *Wall Street Journal*, I have a dandy statistic to cite to my fellow passenger. In Africa, where there is little or no regulation, the death rate in air crashes is more than eighteen times that in North America, where the skies are regulated.

Crazier things have happened

"Surely, they'll realize that it doesn't make sense to invade Iraq," I kept saying to myself throughout 2002. That's why I worry now when I read reports that the Bush administration might attack Iran. It seems so crazy, so improbable, that reasonable people dismiss the possibility out of hand.

But now come the same reporters who warned us in 2002 about the administration's plans for Iraq to tell us that we should worry about Iran: Warren Strobbel, John Walcott, and Nancy Yusef of McClatchy's Washington bureau (formerly Knight Ridder). They say that Cheney is again leading the hawks while Rice and Gates are advocating restraint. For now, Cheney is only urging an attack on the Iranian forces he says are in Iraq. The risk is that such an attack could produce a dangerous reaction by the Iranians, like sinking one of our aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf.

What I suspect is really happening is that Bush is pumping up concern about Iran's coming into Iraq in order to justify our staying. His concern seems to be supported by threats from Ahmadinejad. But my answer to Ahmadinejad is "Welcome to Baghdad and the mess you will inherit." Nothing is more likely to sink him.

> Carl Levin is one of the most respected Democrats in the Senate, but he has set a trap for himself.

You know, that cloud looks like a mushroom

You may have heard that according to the CIA inspector general, fifty to sixty CIA officials were aware of intelligence indicating that two of the 9/11 hijackers might have arrived in this country, and that they were suspected terrorists. Yet not one of the CIA officials thought to notify the FBI, which of course was the agency that would have been responsible for keeping an eye on them.

If you think this behavior is atypical of the CIA, you must read *Legacy of Ashes*, by Pulitzer-winning author Tim Weiner. He does a masterful job of detailing the continuing series of foul-ups that has constituted too much of the agency's history. The foul-ups have been accompanied by successes like the role the agency played in Afghanistan in 2001. But the sad fact is that the significant successes do not eclipse the significant failures.

The one failure that seemed most disturbing to me, however, gets less than a page. It was the agency's total surprise when India exploded its first nuclear bomb. India was not an impenetrable police state—far from it, India was an open democracy whose government had said it wanted a nuclear weapon. But as one was being built, and right up until the day after it was tested, there was not a word from the agency's New Delhi station.

When the AMT hits the ATM

When you read all the moaning from editorial writers at the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* about the impact of the alternative minimum tax, you should ask them to tell you the extent to which their personal problem with the tax is that it deprives them of the benefit of the Bush tax cuts, which, you will recall, they condemned as irresponsible.

One thing to watch as the AMT "reform" movement grows—and grow it will, as it now threatens many elite journalists—is that Max Baucus, the Democratic senator leading the movement, is not known for his immunity to the importunings of lobbyists, and is unlikely to support replacing the lost revenue through other taxes.

One more cost of Iraq

"British Criticize U.S. Air Attacks in Afghan Region—Civilian Toll Is Cited," was a recent headline in the *New York Times*. Of course, the reason for our excessive reliance on air attacks is that, beginning way back in 2002, Bush shortchanged the Afghan front of ground troops in order to prepare and carry out his insane

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invasion of Iraq. We gave our real enemies—Osama bin Laden and the Taliban that protected him—time to recover and come back to threaten Afghanistan, and us, again. And because we don't have enough ground troops, we have to rely too much on bombing, with its inevitable civilian casualties that only create new recruits for the bad guys.

Plane outrageous

I've often fretted about the failure of private plane owners to pay their share of the cost of airport and airline safety. Now, thanks to Nelson Schwarz of the *New York Times*, I have some interesting statistics to support my case. Private planes "account for 16 percent of the air traffic control system's overhead but contribute only 3 percent of the fees earmarked to run the system." And when you're stacked up over New York, fuming about the hot date or crucial business appointment you're in danger of missing, remember that "on a typical day in the airspace over New York roughly 20 to 30 percent of the air traffic comes from corporate jets."

Why Obama should really have that beer

Just to make sure you understand, I want Obama to have a beer with the guys because I want him to win. Ruth Marcus of the *Washington Post* recently reminded me of another reason to favor him. It is that he not only helped pass a "far-reaching ethics and campaign finance bill in the Illinois state senate," but has, since he came to the U.S. Senate, supported an independent commission to review Senate ethics complaints, a reform to which senators with something to hide have been dedicated in their opposition. He also coauthored the lobbying reform bill that has passed both houses of Congress that "to the dismay of some colleagues—[includes] provisions requiring lawmakers to report the names of their lobbyist-bundlers," the fellows who put together bunches of contributions for their favorite candidates. Along with John Edwards, Obama is refusing to take lobbyist and PAC contributions. And, unlike both Clinton and Edwards, he has made his income tax returns public.

Four thousand funerals and a wedding

"I want to know why I'm planning a funeral while George Bush is planning a wedding," asked the mother of a young female soldier who had just been killed in Iraq. She is making the same point that I tried to make in our last issue. In essence, it is this: Would George W. Bush be so willing to continue sending soldiers to die in Iraq if his daughter were among them? And would he have, as he did recently, complained about our leaving Vietnam, if he had, instead of hiding in the then-draft-proof National Guard, actually endured the horrors of fighting in the jungle? WM

Charles Peters is the founding editor of the *Washington Monthly*.

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Party Smashers

Washington was supposed to celebrate Rachel Carson's 100th birthday this year. Then the GOP got the invite.

By Christina Larson

One sultry June day in 2006, Valerie Fellows, press officer at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Washington, took an unexpected phone call from the manager of the Rachel Carson Wildlife Refuge in Maine. "I don't know if you care," said the voice on the other end of the line, "but next May 27th is the 100th anniversary of Rachel Carson's birth." No kidding? Fellows most certainly did care. She had grown up adoring Rachel Carson, who is known as the godmother of American environmentalism. What's more, Carson happened to have been employed by the predecessor to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Fisheries, where she worked as a biologist in the 1930s and '40s. One of Carson's roles had been to edit all agency publications, making the science comprehensible to the layman, a skill she later put to memorable use. Carson wrote several books, but the most famous, her last, was *Silent Spring*, published in 1962. A lyrical and devastating look at indiscriminate pesticide use, *Silent Spring* is often credited with spurring on the eventual creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and, with it, the modern environmental movement.

Fellows, who saw "a huge opportunity" for good publicity, spent the next year rummaging through neglected agency archives, trekking to Carson's former homes, dusting off historical artifacts, and scheduling "centennial activities" to take place from May through October this year. After all, she notes, "how often does your most famous employee turn 100?"

At first, Washington seemed happy to join in the festivities. The National Archives held an exhibit of Carson memorabilia, and several environmental groups cosponsored a commemorative reception on Capitol Hill. In Congress, members vied to outdo each other with odes to Carson's legacy. Representative Tom Udall penned a resolution to honor "the patron saint of the modern environmental movement." Pennsylvania representatives of both parties introduced a bill to rename Rachel Carson's hometown post office in Springdale in her honor. Even Deputy Interior Secretary Lynn Scarlett, who often spars with conservationists over public-lands policies, extolled Carson's work at the Capitol Hill reception.

But the Capitol Dome weathervane swiveled quickly. Democrats may be in charge of Congress now, but Valerie Fellows was about to see how furious a twister conservative Washington can still unleash when it's feeling provoked. And, for the right, Rachel Carson is decidedly provocative. The allegations of her critics can be summed up simply: in recent years, many scientists have concluded that DDT, used sparingly, could help eradicate malaria in Africa by targeting the mosquitoes that spread it. But the pesticide remains controversial, largely because of Carson's work publicizing the damage wrought by DDT in the 1950s and '60s, when it was used indiscriminately to dust fields in the United States. Since malaria kills millions, goes the argument, Carson is responsible for millions of deaths.

The chorus quickly sounded off. "A Centennial We Could Do Without," complained the *National Review*. "Fateful Voice of a Generation Still Drowns Out Real

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Science," objected John Tierney's *New York Times* column. "Rachel Carson's Deadly Legacy," lamented the title of a piece in the *Washington Times*.

Carson's defenders protested the onslaught, which they rightly viewed as absurd, since neither Rachel Carson nor the EPA ever had the authority to ban DDT use in Africa. (Indeed, Carson had never lobbied to ban DDT in America, but simply focused attention on its haphazard use.) But the detractors were already on a roll. Republicans on Capitol Hill eagerly took their turn. "The fact is, no matter how much some might want to ignore the suffering, brain damage, and death caused by rampant malaria," opined Senator Tom Coburn, Republican of Oklahoma, to a colleague in the House, such unfortunate events are "a part of [Carson's] legacy." Even as Coburn vowed to block any Senate bill to honor Carson, Minority Leader John Boehner pledged similar resistance in the House.

To lend scientific polish to the anti-Carson forces, sympathetic experts would need to be summoned. Those would come from the Competitive Enterprise Institute, a free-market think tank best known for "debunking" global warming science and celebrating carbon dioxide emissions (a recent ad slogan ran, "Some Call It Pollution. We Call It Life.") CEI, which is generously funded by the petroleum and chemical industries, has recently turned its attention to Carson. Among other things, it operates a Web site called www.rachelwaswrong.org, the homepage of which features photos of Ugandan malaria victims, all hollow cheeks and big eyes. But why, precisely, is CEI stirred by their plight? The institute, which opposes most environmental regulation and blames Carson for extreme anti-chemical policies, hopes that tarring an icon will help diminish support for future green laws. Or, as the Web site explains, perhaps new interpretations of Carson's legacy will help in "revers[ing] misguided public policies and preventing the implementation of new ones."

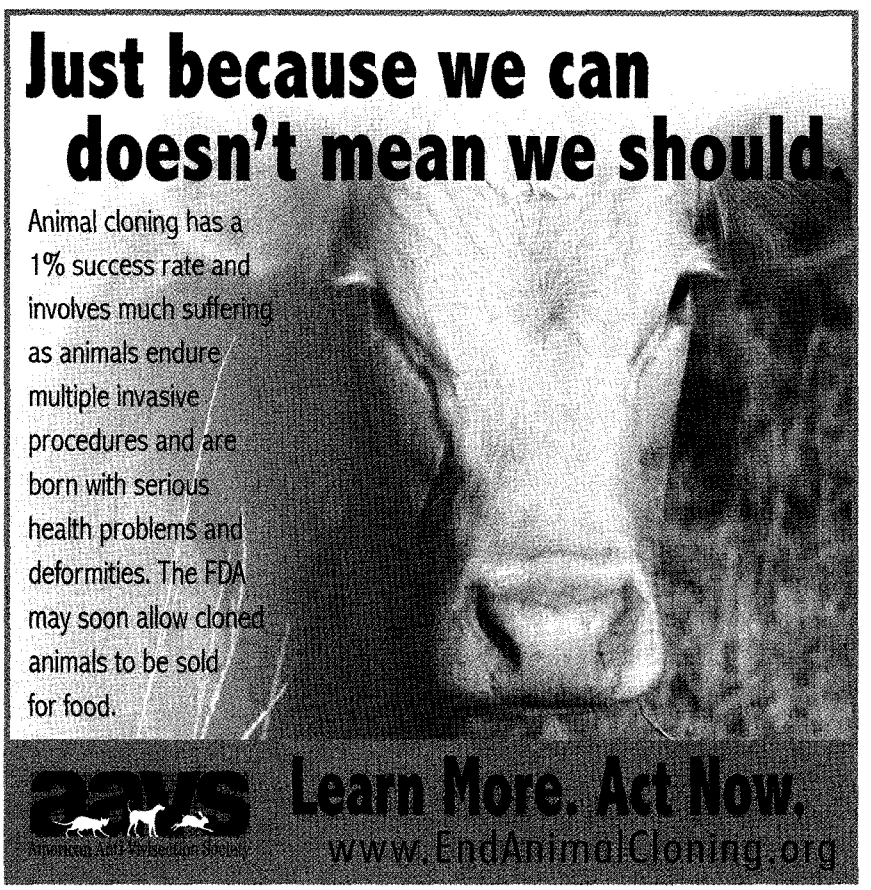
For Fellows, caught unsuspecting by the hullabaloo, seeing Rachel Carson maligned so unfairly was painful. Worse yet, she had to remain tight-lipped in public. While Washington buzzes with lobbyists who are free to be talkative, employees of any federal agency are forbidden from volunteering their opinions concerning congressional debates. (The logic of the law, enacted during the reign of Newt Gingrich, is that the executive branch should in no way be allowed to "interfere" with the legislative process.) "Nobody called us so we could defend the science," says Fellows. "The agency is restricted. It was really hard—we weren't allowed to say anything in opposition."

In the Senate, Coburn stonewalled all Carson bills. In the House, when the Springdale post office proposal came to a vote, fifty-three Republicans, including John Boehner, cast ballots to keep Carson's name off the wall. "It's very strange," observed one Democratic staffer. "I've never seen a controversy over a post office."

In the end, the bills all died, one by one. There would be no Rachel Carson post office, no official Rachel Carson day, no annual reminder, and no anniversary on the calendar. Republicans on the Hill toasted their symbolic victory. CEI focused on its next target: seeing that strict chemical legislation recently enacted in the European Union doesn't jump-start support for similar laws on these shores. The EU law is "the start of something much bigger," warns CEI's Angela Logomasini, who has penned a number of op-eds about *Silent Spring* and malaria. "It's the first step in trying to come up with some sort of global chemicals management."

Fellows, for her part, will still participate in local centennial events. She now also has a new field-research topic, the ecology of Washington. The last time we spoke, she told me about the Reason Foundation, a regulation-phobic think tank assailing the Endangered Species Act as the "bald eagle's worst enemy." Looking back at the Rachel Carson uproar, Fellows is still incredulous. "I had no idea," she says. "We thought this would just be a big celebration." WM

Christina Larson is an editor of the *Washington Monthly*.



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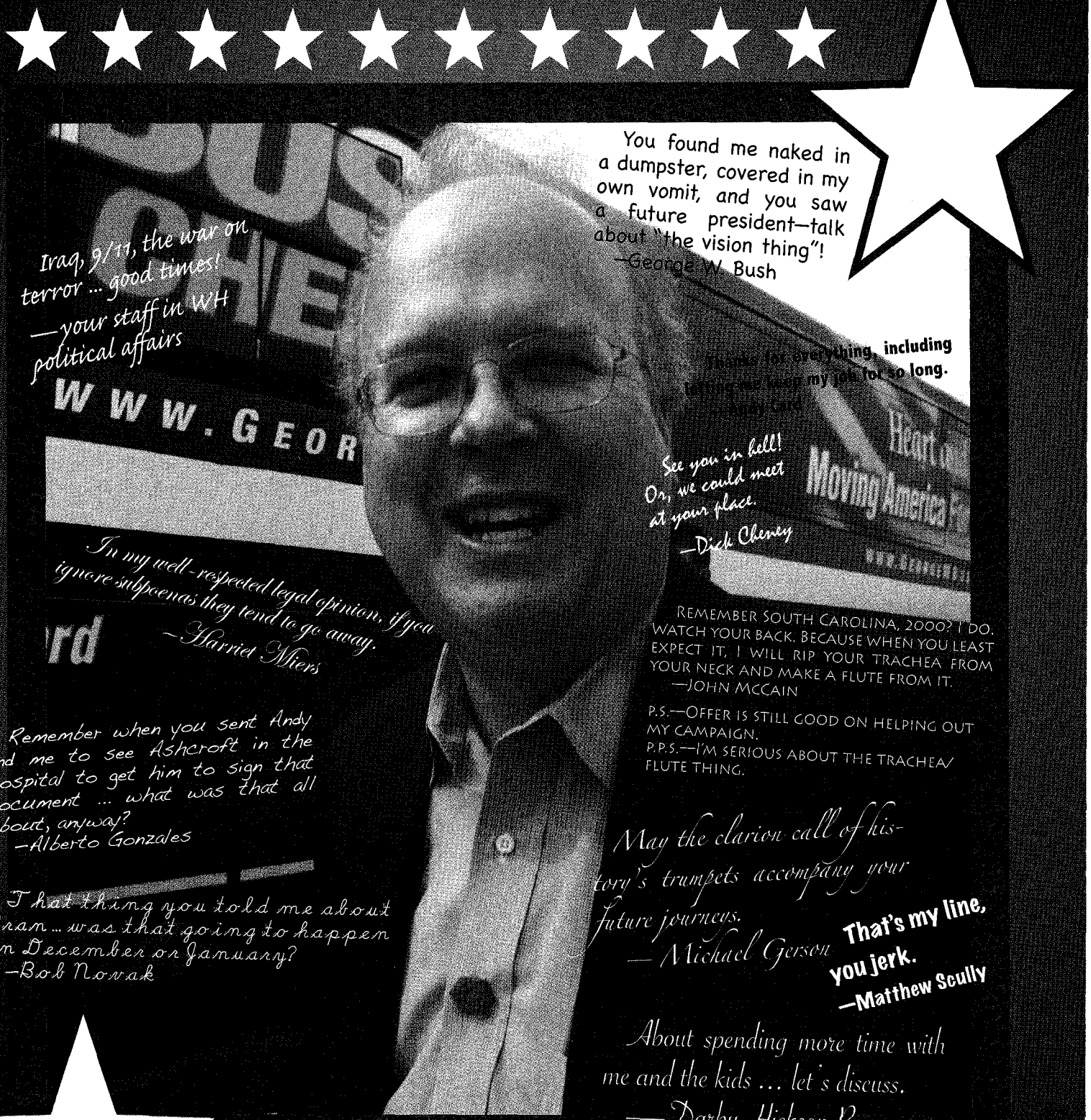
Best of Luck, Karl

ROVE'S OFFICE MATES BID HIM GOOD-BYE



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THE *Monthly* INTERVIEW

R. J. Hillhouse

One of the great unheralded casualties of the end of the cold war was the espionage novel. In the 1990s, the genre floundered for lack of reliable villains. The war on terror has supplied a new set of bad guys, but writers have been slow to adapt. John le Carré gamely tried his hand at a terrorism novel, *Absolute Friends*, in 2003, but the best parts of the book were an extended cold war flashback. Like the generals who can't stop fighting the last war, it seems that novelists can't stop writing it, either.

But popular culture eventually catches up, and this year saw perhaps the first spy thriller about what is certainly a post–September 11 phenomenon: the rise of the private contractor. R. J. Hillhouse's *Outsourced* inhabits a world where the CIA—le Carré's métier—is on the ropes, and the protagonists instead owe their loyalties to private firms with sinister names like Black Management. The *Washington Monthly*'s Markos Kounalakis and Peter Laufer talked to Hillhouse about the book, and about the real-world dangers of relying on private corporations to spy for us.

WM: What's the basic plot of *Outsourced*?

RH: The book is about the outsourcing of intelligence and the military, and, at the same time, the turf wars between the Pentagon and the CIA. It's about a guy named Hunter Stone, who is a spy for the Pentagon. He's assigned to penetrate a private military corporation that's suspected of selling seized arms to terrorists. He's set up and targeted in the multibillion-dollar war on terror, and the only person he can trust is his ex-fiancée, Camille Black, who runs a private intelligence company herself, and unfortunately the CIA has hired her to kill him.

WM: The back flap of your book says you've got a PhD, you speak a bunch of languages, and you lecture. But what do you really do?

RH: I'm currently writing the blog "Thespywhobilledme.com," which is about the outsourcing of national security and the outsourcing of intelligence, and I'm also writing novels. In the past I've done a variety of things—including smuggling between Eastern and Western Europe back in the old communist days, money laundering, loan sharking to the Estonian mafia. Run-of-the-mill stuff like that.

WM: What's your expertise? And were these activities you've engaged in nefarious, or were you doing this in a quasilegal manner?

RH: Well, I'm pleased to say I've broken no laws in countries that still exist. My PhD is from the University of Michigan in political science, and I'm a former professor of political science. That's one of the things that brought me to writing novels on politics. I've been really frustrated with the state of political thrillers and spy novels in this country, because they are all, for lack of a better term, mind candy. They're not based on what's really going on in politics in ways that fiction in many countries, and once upon a time here, makes us think about who we are. How are we really fighting the war on terror? What are the mixed morals that are part of daily life in the world of espionage? I wanted to explore that.

WM: How did you do the research for this book?

RH: The media hasn't caught up with some of the things that are written about in the book. So it was really necessary to get ahead of things, and the only way to do that was to network within the intelligence community, the military community, and special operations. So I have dealt with everything from boardroom executives at intel and military corporations, as well as Pentagon people, contacts in the Pentagon, as well as frontline mercenaries and contract soldiers.

WM: How do you differentiate between those last two?

RH: Well, in some cases, the guys who are going under contract with companies like Triple Canopy and Blackwater, they are usually retired military, and they're doing it for patriotic reasons as well as to get that bass boat they've always dreamed of. And then there are some guys who really have been hard-core, old-school mercenaries, who have gone from African wars to sojourns into Burma for whatever government or whatever company paid them to do what they needed them to do.

WM: In *Outsourced*, the turf wars are not just between the Pentagon and the CIA—they're between the private contractors, too. Do you find that in reality? Has your research shown that these private companies that are doing a lot of business with our money in Iraq are fighting each other?

RH: In some cases, yes, there is infighting going on. The extent of outsourcing is just astonishing. Over half the workforce of the CIA works for private corporations. And we have situations where contractors are managing other contractors, and some contractors are managing contracts of contractors. So

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there are multiple conflicts of interest, and that's not good for national security.

WM: It's also not good for any type of oversight.

RH: There are some very large oversight issues. It's really shocking to see what little control the government has over the work of the CIA. I've heard of branches where the ratio is one government employee to twenty-five private contractors, and that involves multiple companies and multiple layers of administration.

WM: So what's your message here regarding outsourcing and the so-called war on terror?

RH: What we really need to look at is how we're fighting the war on terror and what kind of industry we're allowing to grow. Some of the very same corporations that benefit, who are very involved with the Defense Department, are also now very involved with the frontline intelligence as well as the intelligence analysis. So there is an unprecedented opportunity there to manipulate American foreign policy in whatever direction a corporation or their clients would want it to go.

WM: Although maybe it's not all that different than it's always been, back to days like, "What's good for General Motors is good for America"—or maybe it was the other way around.

RH: I think there's a difference now. Companies like Lockheed, Raytheon, Booz Allen Hamilton, and others are actually fielding the spies that are gathering the intelligence and who are processing this intelligence in terms of analysis, and it's getting fed up the pipeline, so the work by private corporations has become incorporated into the president's daily brief. So the actual work of those companies is going to the president's desk every day under the auspices of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. To be quite honest, these briefs should look more like NASCAR, where they have corporate logos everywhere, so at least we know where the intelligence is coming from. WM

Markos Kounalakis, the publisher and president of the *Washington Monthly*, and author **Peter Laufer**, the magazine's broadcast editor, host the weekly program *Washington Monthly on the Radio*, from which this interview was excerpted. The show can be heard on our flagship station, Progressive Talk 1260 AM, in Washington, D.C. For a list of other stations or to listen online, visit www.washingtonmonthly.com.

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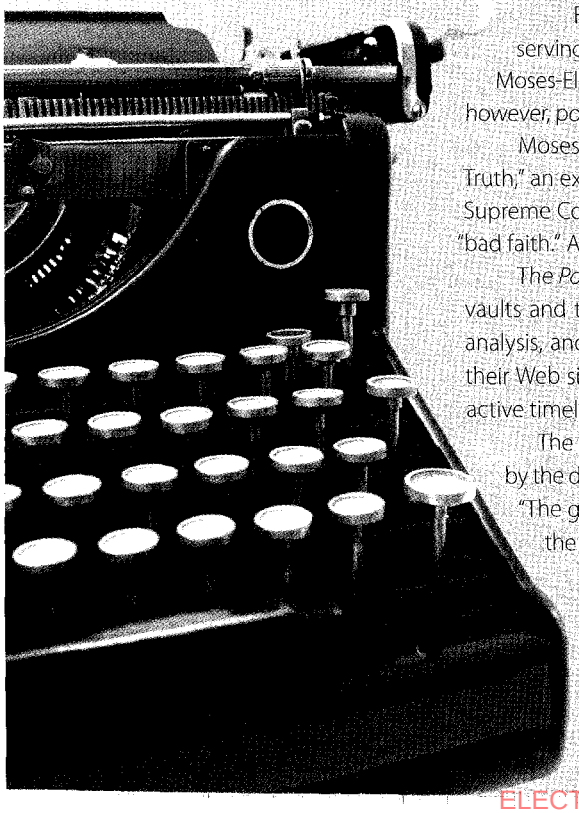

"Trashing the Truth"

by Susan Greene and Miles Moffeit, *Denver Post*, July 23–26, 2007

For twenty years, Clarence Moses-El has claimed that he is innocent of the rape for which he's serving a forty-eight-year sentence. When a judge finally granted his request for a DNA test in 1995, Moses-El raised $1,000 from fellow inmates to pay for the lab work. Before the test could be performed, however, police destroyed the crime-scene evidence, in what they said was an accident.

Moses-El's case is one of 141 uncovered by the *Denver Post* in their four-day series "Trashing the Truth," an exhaustive examination of DNA mishandling. Looming large over the controversy is a 1988 Supreme Court decision declaring that destruction of evidence only violates a fair trial if it's done in "bad faith." As the *Post* describes, however, that standard is almost impossible to prove.

The *Post* approaches the issue from multiple angles, including the disorganization of evidence vaults and the lack of a uniform national policy. The series combines inmate interviews, statistical analysis, and expert testimony. The *Post* also developed a multimedia presentation of the issue on their Web site, featuring explanations of DNA evidence, video interviews with inmates, and an interactive timeline of the history of DNA case law and criminal policy.

The series has already made an impact. One case highlighted by the paper is being reexamined by the district attorney; Colorado Governor Bill Ritter has created a task force to investigate the issue. "The governor has been reading the *Denver Post* series," an aide told the paper. "We are aware of the issues that it has raised. And we'll be having conversations about that as we go forward."

As for Moses-El, the Denver DA is defensive. "You can't just assume that [the destroyed evidence] would have exonerated him," he told the *Post*. Moses-El will have another twenty-eight years to wonder just that. WM

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The Good Actor: Bob Herbert (far left)—along with Robin Wright Penn, Martin Sheen, and Alfre Woodard—participates in a reading of the play *Speak Truth to Power*, by Ariel Dorfman

Why Is Bob Herbert Boring?

THE PERILS OF PUNDITRY FOR THE POWERLESS

By T. A. Frank

The first thing you need to know about *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert is that he's always right. No, not in the way a drunk in a bar is always right—Herbert's genuinely right, or at least close enough that it'd be petty to look for exceptions. When the majority loses its bearings, Herbert sticks with the sane minority.

In the late 1990s, when the rest of us were being entertained by news of Clintonian indiscretions, Herbert had his eye elsewhere: "A level of terror unimaginable to most Americans has been the rule in most of Afghanistan since the Taliban took power a few years ago."

After the election of 2000, when pundits were asserting that Bush would have to govern from the center, Herbert was warning that Bush was "the incredible shrinking front man of the G.O.P." and that the heart of the party could be found in "Tom DeLay and his crowd."

In 2002 and 2003, Herbert bitterly opposed the invasion of Iraq, warning that "entrenched economic and social problems are likely to undermine even basic stability for years to come." During Iraq's 2005 elections—a short-lived triumph that led Herbert's colleagues to pronounce themselves "unreservedly happy about the outcome" (Thomas Friedman) or to suggest that Iraqis had acquired the "habits of self-regulating liberty, compromise, tolerance and power-sharing" (David Brooks)—Herbert was hardly euphoric. "What we saw yesterday was an uncommonly brave electorate," he noted, but also "a recipe for more war."

All well and good, but—you protest—the man is basically just a predictable liberal softie. Well, if that's the case, then tell me if you expected that Bob Herbert would be an interventionist hawk on Somalia in 1993, Haiti in 1994, and Afghanistan in 2001. Or that he'd say this shortly after the execution in California of Stanley "Tookie" Williams, cofounder of the Crips, in 2005: "I noticed that Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, Louis Farrakhan, Snoop Dogg and other 'leaders' and celebrities turned out in South Central Los Angeles on Tuesday for the funeral ... [That] tells you much of what you need to know about the current state of black leadership in the U.S."

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And then there's Bob Herbert's main focus. He reports on the disadvantaged and disenfranchised of America, about whom he will tell you things you didn't expect. I doubt you knew that "nearly half of full-time private sector workers in the U.S. get no paid sick days. None." And have you ever been at a dinner where the tab came to more than $125 a person? According to Herbert, high school kids in Brooklyn can't believe this happens. "How much can you eat?" asked one. I know I experienced a salutary wince when I read that.

So let's recap: Bob Herbert is a sensible person who usually assesses things more accurately than his colleagues, regularly hits the streets to report on the world outside, shines a light on people and issues that deserve far more attention than they usually get, and tells you things you really ought to know but don't. But here's the catch: you don't read Bob Herbert. Or, if you say you do, I don't believe you.

The numbers are on my side. Take a look in LexisNexis and see how often various *New York Times* columnists have been mentioned (not syndicated) in other papers this year. Thomas Friedman gets more than 3,000 mentions, and David Brooks gets 2,650. Maureen Dowd gets 1,615; Paul Krugman, 1,179; Nicholas Kristof, 805. Bob Herbert gets 533. Web sites that shape national news coverage rarely link to him. ABC's The Note, one of the most insidery of Washington publications, has in the past few years referred to Paul Krugman 146 times, David Brooks 129 times, and Maureen Dowd 84 times. Bob Herbert? Twice.

Even liberal blogs that bemoan how liberals get outgunned by the right seldom discuss Herbert. Search the archives of Atrios and you'll find eighty-seven references to Friedman but only fifteen to Herbert. On Talking Points Memo, a search for Dowd calls up twenty mentions. Brooks and Krugman each draw nineteen; Kristof, thirteen; and Friedman, eleven. Herbert gets three.

More telling for me is what I pick up from peers. I've spoken to a couple dozen journalists of the center-left variety, and most, after insisting on being off the record or unnamed, confess to reading Bob Herbert rarely, if ever. "I've literally never heard someone say, 'Hey, did you read Bob Herbert today?' Never in my entire life," said one reporter for a Washington political magazine. Said another: "I haven't read him in years." The *New Republic* may have captured it in a recent headline for a hit piece on John Tierney: "How could a *New York Times* columnist be more boring than Bob Herbert?"

This bothers me. Bob Herbert is the only national columnist at a major newspaper who consistently writes about the issues in our country that matter most yet seem to be covered least. Arthur Miller, one of Herbert's favorite authors, once said that "Americans in general live on the edge of a cliff; they're waiting for the other shoe to drop." Many opinion leaders don't get this; Herbert does. In a sea of plugged-in, powerful pundits, Herbert is the lone unplugged spokesman for America's little guy. He's the delegate of the deprived. I could not admire his efforts more.

But, honestly, I don't read him either. I'll devour a Maureen Dowd column in which David Geffen trash-talks the Clintons. But I'll skip the next day's Herbert column counseling me to pay less attention to Anna Nicole Smith and more to, for instance, rebuilding New Orleans.

I feel lousy about saying this. Bob Herbert's on my team. By contrast, I could easily name ten other columnists who seem to make it their mission to find new, untested forms of destruction to bring upon us. If you told me that, say, Charles Krauthammer's articles were ghostwritten by Skeletor, I doubt I'd blink.

I focus on Herbert precisely because I wish he were genuinely influential. Herbert has one of the most powerful megaphones in the world with which to move elite opinion—that of policymakers, journalists, entertainers, businesspeople, and the millions of middle-class readers of the *New York Times*—and yet he doesn't move it. Twice a week, Herbert yells at them for their indifference. Twice a week, they slam the door and run out for a joyride with badboy David Brooks. If Herbert is a bridge between the problems that are neglected and the people who can fix them, then he should be closed for inspection.

History and science make a compelling case that most of us are hard-pressed to give a damn.

Bob Herbert and his fans disagree with me, naturally. Herbert would say that he has helped shift public opinion on issues such as the suppression of black votes in Florida, the rendition of Maher Arar to Syria, and the death penalty. But what I see is that his most influential audience isn't usually paying attention. Maybe that's the fault of Bob Herbert, or maybe it's the fault of Beltway insularity, or maybe it's the fault of life itself. But anyone who wants to advance these crucial issues must figure out the answer to this question: Why is Bob Herbert boring?

Let's suppose it's Bob's fault. Canvassing journalists for what they considered Herbert's vulnerabilities, I compiled a list of criticisms: The column is predictable. It doesn't introduce unusual metaphors or conceits. It doesn't traffic in new ideas. It doesn't strive for humor. It will summarize a liberal think-tank report. It doesn't offer much reporting.

That's a tough list, but at least one criticism—that Herbert doesn't do much reporting—is untrue. Many of Herbert's columns are based on extensive reporting, some of it tenacious. In 1999, a rogue cop in Tulia, Texas, orchestrated a supposed sting that sent forty-six of the town's residents (thirty-nine of whom were black, about half of Tulia's black males) to prison on bogus charges. Herbert, tipped by jour-

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Amid the Glitz: In a prosperous country, Herbert writes about another America that gets too little attention.

nalists from the *Texas Observer*, traveled to Tulia in 2002 and penned ten columns on the subject, eventually helping to get most of the men released. In just the past few weeks, he's reported from Chicago, Boston, Newark, and Las Vegas.

As for the rest of the charges, let's take a closer look. Okay, let's not—I concede that they've got some legitimacy. Herbert's writings do sometimes fail to surprise. Here's a selection of recent tag lines: "All children need health coverage, not just the well-to-do." "It is long past time for the harassment of ethnic minorities by the police to cease." "There are consequences to neglecting the nation's infrastructure." Contrast these with one from David Brooks: "A thing as seemingly superficial as a name can influence, even if slightly, the course of a whole life." Which piece are you going to read?

Herbert also has a few quirks that lend themselves to parody. Recently, in *Slate*, Christopher Hitchens mocked columnists "like (say) Bob Herbert" who try to be "both 'relevant' and 'contemporary' while still manifesting their self-evident superiority." Hitchens added, "Thus—I paraphrase only slightly—'Even as we all obsess about Paris Hilton, the people of Darfur continue to die.'" Bob Herbert, five weeks later: "You've probably heard more than you wanted to about David Beckham and Posh Spice in recent days, but not a lot about the deaths of these children and teenagers in Chicago."

But here's the thing. Even if one grants these critics their points, the mystery doesn't vanish. William Kristol and Fred Barnes are predictable, uninterested in clever twists, flat in affect, and reliably free of humor. Nevertheless, many of us read them closely. That's because we know they're in tight with the Bush administration and get listened to by the vast conservative movement.

The same goes for the eminent *New York Times* columnists of yore, who evinced far less brio than Herbert does. Regard veteran foreign correspondent C. L. Sulzberger in 1976: "The Lebanese civil war is as pointless as it is dangerous." Or observe *New York Times* legend James Reston describe the Ford administration as "a little like the Washington Redskins professional football team. It has won a few games with its old pros, but is being overwhelmed by the challenge of younger men and newer problems." Readers surely weren't riveted by such insights, but they knew that the authors were playing footsie with Pompidou (or similar) and worth keeping an eye on.

The point is that some columnists are influential because they're interesting, while others are interesting because they're influential. If Herbert were having weekly lunches with, say, President John Edwards, he'd probably be one of the most closely read columnists in the country. Power can spruce up many things. That also means that, while Herbert's column might be more interesting if it tried to be jazzier, this isn't a sufficient diagnosis in itself.

That leaves another branch to be explored: that Beltway insularity is to blame. Never have I felt more inclined to resort to this explanation than when I met Bob Herbert, whom I wound up liking just as much as I feared I would. He makes a pretty good case for the idea that it is cocooned Washington types like me who are the problem.

Not that I would entirely mind trading cocoons with Herbert: he lives comfortably with his wife on the fifth floor of one of the Trump Place condominiums on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The main area of the apartment is a spacious

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living room with a wall of windows overlooking the West Side highway, the Hudson River, and New Jersey.

On the day I visited, Herbert was preparing to fly to Chicago to report on the killings of schoolchildren. His traveling attire was crisply casual: jeans, a striped blue shirt (two buttons open), and white socks and sneakers. Herbert is sixty-two, but he could easily pass for someone ten or fifteen years younger.

To talk with Herbert is to have that pleasing experience that James Baldwin describes of arguing "with people who do not disagree with me too profoundly." We discussed disappointment with the Clintons, ambivalence about LBJ, inequities in criminal justice, and the proper way to intervene in foreign countries. Easygoing, decent, and concerned about exactly the right things, Herbert reflects carefully on his words. He projects a winning sort of outrage somehow devoid of bile.

Throughout his life, Herbert has navigated between the privileged and the underprivileged, never quite on either side of the divide. He was born in Brooklyn in 1945 but raised in Montclair, New Jersey, where his family owned an upholstery shop. He describes his upbringing as "a working-class family with a middle-class sensibility." Herbert was spared much of the racial prejudice and unrest stirring through the country in the 1950s and early '60s—Montclair was a "surprisingly integrated town," and he attended a mostly white parochial school. Although he did well academically, he never enrolled full-time in college. (He completed a degree in 1988, receiving a BS in journalism from SUNY Empire State College.)

One of his least privileged periods began in 1965, when he was drafted into the Army and encountered racism of the rawest sort. In Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, where he trained for several weeks, recruits from southern states would call him "nigger" or show him pictures of family members wearing Ku Klux Klan outfits. "That was completely new, completely traumatic," he said. In addition to the emotional ordeal, the physical environment was grim: temperatures during marches were so cold that soldiers' eyelids would freeze shut.

The greatest menace Herbert faced was a possible stint in Vietnam, but instead he was sent to Korea, in 1966. The surroundings were desolate, but he escaped the jungles. Many of his acquaintances didn't. One of Herbert's most affecting columns recounts the Vietnam experiences of two of his friends, Paul Conover and Michael Farmer. Both made it home from combat safely—at first.

> *Then the unthinkable happened. Farmer, who had enlisted for four years and was still in the service, got orders to go back to Vietnam. We told him not to go. Call your congressman, we said. Fight this thing. But Farmer didn't know how.*
>
> *It's not hard to guess what happened. Farmer's second tour lasted only a few months. I was in the back of my father's upholstery shop one afternoon when Conover walked in.*
>
> *"Farmer didn't make it," he said. And then he started crying.*
>
> *A year passed ... Conover got married. Other buddies got killed in the war, which began to look like it might go on forever. My sister's boyfriend got shot.*
>
> *I didn't realize it, but Conover's struggle was winding down. He wouldn't make it, either. I never got the story straight. All I know is that he got his hands on a gun, and one night he waited in a car outside his house for his wife to come home. When she showed up he shot her dead. Then he killed himself ...*
>
> *A couple of years ago I visited the Vietnam Memorial in Washington. I found Farmer's name, and then, not thinking, looked for Conover's. Of course, it wasn't there.*

After getting out of the Army and working in the upholstery business, Herbert decided to pursue a career in writing. Since he had no obvious ins, he telephoned the *Newark Star-Ledger* to ask for advice. The paper offered him a job. It was 1970. In 1976, Herbert was hired by the *New York Daily News*, where he rose to become the city hall bureau chief and then a columnist. He was writing the column and working as a national correspondent for NBC News when Howell Raines hired him for the *Times* op-ed page in 1993.

I asked Herbert why he thinks his columns draw less attention in blogs and other media outlets than those of his colleagues. "The media tends to be drawn like a magnet to power," Herbert said. "Stories about power will generate more chatter." He added: "I think people who are in privileged positions either don't think a lot about people who are not, or don't care about them."

A number of journalists agree with him. One is Katrina vanden Heuvel, editor of the *Nation*. "There's a segmentation in our society that may lead some readers not to care about many of the issues Bob Herbert writes about," she says. "They may be more interested in style than substance." Columnist E. J. Dionne Jr., who praises Herbert as "kind of a prophet," has a similar stance. "Bob resists the temptation to be glitzy," Dionne says. "People don't always want to face up to the things he writes about."

All fair enough. Nevertheless, many of my sources who criticized Herbert's column underscored their admiration for the work of writers like Jason DeParle and Katherine Boo, who also illuminate the lives of the poor. Granted, these writers operate outside of the column format—in longer articles and books—but their ability to generate interest in Herbert's chosen subjects suggests that elite readers aren't incontrovertibly apathetic about the lives of those less fortunate.

Since I've examined two theories of blame—it's Bob's fault; it's Washington's fault—and found both to be partly wanting, that leaves another possibility: it's the world's fault. Or, at least, it's the fault of human nature. Sadly, history and science make a compelling case that most of us are, indeed, hard-pressed to give a damn.

In the 1960s, the economist Thomas Schelling performed research demonstrating that people are more likely to be moved by single victims than by statistics. In 2005, the psychologists Deborah A. Small, George Loewenstein, and Paul Slovic found the limits of human compassion to be even more irrational and constrained. In their study, students at

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a university in Pennsylvania were paid five dollars to complete questionnaires on technology. Enclosed with the questionnaire was a seemingly unrelated letter soliciting donations to a hunger relief organization in Africa.

The study's first conclusion was what the researchers had expected: people are more compassionate when they are told about a specific victim. When respondents were asked to donate money to help feed a seven-year-old African girl named Rokia, they contributed more than twice what they did when just confronted with general statistics on hunger.

But then things got surprising. When Rokia was presented *with* the statistics, the donations fell by nearly half. Worse still, when the authors asked one set of subjects to perform mathematical calculations and the other set of subjects to describe their feelings when they heard the word "baby," the subjects who'd done math gave only about half as much to Rokia as the ones who'd thought about babies. Apparently, just thinking analytically makes us stingier. The authors of the study concluded that "calculative thought lessens the appeal of an identifiable victim."

That's bad news for Herbert, who's fond of specific tales paired with statistics. Penetrating the sympathy barrier of readers is possible, but it generally requires a lot of words and time, and a columnist is restricted to 700 words twice a week. Even worse, op-ed pages are by nature tilted toward argument. Surrounded by analysis, a column that seeks our compassion is already in unfriendly soil.

Some experts suggest that human nature also just resists bad news. Dan Heath, coauthor of *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, observed in an e-mail to me that columnists who inflict hard truths on readers

> *have to make deposits along with the withdrawals. Otherwise, if they cause us hurt twice a week, we instinctively look away, like smokers who don't want to look at blackened-lung photos. Conversely, if Dave Barry took a stand on health care, I think it'd be fixed overnight ... he's made so many deposits and so few withdrawals that millions feel like they owe him something.*

Clearly, then, Bob Herbert is at a disadvantage before he even puts pen to paper. Poor people plus statistics equals boring—we've got the science to prove it. But this explanation, too, is only partial. Otherwise, we'd have to conclude that all columnists with Herbert's convictions and interests are irremediably uninteresting. And surely nothing, except maybe Mort Kondracke, is irremediably uninteresting.

This whodunit will not have an ending worthy of Agatha Christie. But it will, at least, have a resolution: Bobdunit. It's true that elites don't care enough about the world of the working class or the poor. It's true that human nature is inherently biased against Herbert-style entreaties. These obstacles make his job very, very hard. But they are constants. A columnist must use the only variable, his column, to surmount them. Instead, Bob Herbert disregards them. His underlying problem turns out to be simple: he doesn't write with his audience in mind.

When I asked Herbert who he envisions his readers to be, he laughed. "I don't picture readers," he said. "I picture issues and the people that I'm covering." Likewise, when I inquired in an earlier conversation which journalists he considered to be role models, he demurred. "If I can, I'd like to take a pass on that. One, I don't want to talk about current journalists. And the second part is, I didn't model myself on journalists. There were politicians that were more influential to my thinking." He named Harry Truman as one.

Of course, appealing directly to the masses worked for Harry Truman. Bob Herbert, though, writes for a publication that, like it or not, reaches a different audience. Move that audience and, for better or worse, you move the country. "There's what Malcolm Gladwell calls the tipping point of the discourse," says media critic Eric Alterman. "If you don't address yourself to that, nobody will argue with you, and maybe people will feel better for having their views reinforced, but the issue itself won't be advanced."

Certainly, when Herbert focuses his column on specific, local cases of injustice, he can be very effective—when the *New York Times* is on your back, you have to deal with it. On national issues, however, Herbert doesn't write as if he knows that his readers are informed, jaded, and hard to hook.

This is why, for example, Herbert's column in August decrying conservative attempts to block the expansion of the Children's Health Insurance Program as "cruel" was read less than Paul Krugman's column one day earlier on the same topic, which started with a deliberately specious case for abolishing public schools. Krugman's effort, which made the *Times* Web site's top-25-most-e-mailed-articles list, wasn't necessarily revelatory, but it did try to weave in a provocative analogy rather than simply restate established liberal opinion.

My editors wanted to know if, at the end of this article, I'd fire Bob Herbert. Please. As I've said, he's on my team. Besides, if I could fire *Times* columnists, who knows where I'd stop? Herbert has a combination of skill and experience that most of us could only hope to match. If he'd overcome his indifference to "chatter" and elite opinion and instead try to attract and coopt it—in other words, think about who his audience is and what he wants it to do—he could be one of the most powerful liberal voices in the country.

But I also think that the *Times* op-ed page could use more than just one writer on Herbert's beat. The *New York Times* (or any other major paper that professes to care about America's dispossessed) owes it to readers to find the sort of columnists who can wed the sentiments of Bob Herbert to the influence of William Kristol. And maybe, better still, it will find a conservative columnist who weds the sentiments of William Kristol to the influence of Bob Herbert. It wouldn't be a terrible world if we could read a conservative columnist in the *Times* and say, for a change, "Man, why is he so boring?" WM

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Best Care Everywhere

Here's an idea: a civilian VA for the uninsured, and maybe the rest of us.

By Phillip Longman

Back in July, while trying to justify his opposition to expanding government health care coverage for children, President Bush made a telling comment. The uninsured, he said, "have access to health care in America. After all, you just go to an emergency room."

That remark stuck many as blithe and callous, and in many ways it was. The uninsured don't receive in ERs anything like the full array of health care they need. Indeed, one of the abiding arguments *for* universal health care is that patients often wind up in the emergency room with acute illnesses that could have been treated earlier, and more cheaply, had they been able to afford regular doctor's visits.

Still, there was a kernel of truth to Bush's comment—one that we ought to take as a jumping-off point for rethinking how best to provide health insurance for all. The fact is, as a nation we already have an extensive, if ad hoc, system for providing health care to the uninsured. A fair amount of money flows through that system. And the quality of care it provides is far better than you might think.

According to the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, Americans who lacked health insurance in 2004 received an average of $1,629 per person in medical services. That's only about 55 percent of what fully insured Americans consumed that year, but it's still more than the *total* average per capita health care expenditure in Europe.

Some of that medical care is delivered at the suburban hospitals and doctor's offices where those of us with health insurance generally get treated. But the lion's share of health care for the uninsured is provided by assorted "St. Elsewhere" institutions: typically big, old, nonprofit community or teach-

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St. Elsewhere Care: Inner-city hospitals are having trouble providing decent care and making ends meet—but in this problem lies an opportunity.

ing hospitals in poorer neighborhoods, with additional help from smaller public clinics.

This Spartan, patchwork system is in financial trouble, due largely to the cost of the uncompensated treatment that St. Elsewheres provide. But it nonetheless continues to offer surprisingly good care. A recent RAND study found that uninsured patients receive only 53.7 percent of the care experts believe they should get. Not so hot, right? But according to the same study, patients with private, fee-for-service insurance are *even less* likely to receive appropriate, evidence-based treatment. Indeed, among Americans receiving acute care, those who lack insurance stand a slightly better chance of receiving proper treatment than patients covered by Medicaid, Medicare, or any form of private insurance.

It's not fun to be overtreated, even if you get valet parking and the finest in pudding.

Counterintuitive as this may seem, in health care less is often more. The uninsured are virtually immune from receiving unnecessary surgery or other forms of overtreatment that the system constantly encourages. Once uninsured patients are through the door, they cost the hospital money until its doctors make them well enough to leave. There is no incentive to give them treatments they don't need. Since about 20 percent to 30 percent of all health care spending in the United States goes for overtreatment—much of it dangerous—this is no small advantage.

It's also true that the nation's public hospitals, while they may have a Dickensian atmosphere and lack the very latest imaging machines, tend to deliver higher-quality health care than their more prestigious counterparts. For example, Dartmouth researchers John E. Wennberg and Elliot S. Fisher have found that among Medicare patients who are not terminally ill, and who share the same age, socioeconomic, and health status, the chance of dying in the next five years is greater if they go to a high-spending hospital than to a low-spending hospital. Whether suffering from heart attacks, colon cancer, or hip fractures, patients live longer if they stay away from "elite" hospitals, with their overabundance of specialists, and choose a lower-cost St. Elsewhere. Given this unexpected reality, it is perhaps not surprising that patient satisfaction also declines as a hospital's spending per patient rises. It's not fun to be overtreated, even if you get valet parking and the finest in pudding.

None of this is to minimize the plight of the uninsured, who die at higher rates than the rest of us in large part because they don't have access to affordable primary care. But the fact that uninsured patients receive higher-quality acute

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care than do those with insurance ought to make us think twice about all the plans being put forth by presidential candidates to expand health insurance.

Virtually every one of those plans, Democratic and Republican alike, rests on the assumption that the uninsured should be brought into the health care system the rest of us use. But what if something like the opposite is true? What if the best way to help the uninsured is to make the health care delivery system they already use—the St. Elsewhere model—better and more affordable? What if that path to 100 percent coverage turns out to be not just better for the health of the uninsured, but cheaper for taxpayers than any other universal health care plan out there, and politically more viable? And what if, eventually, the rest of us could join that system?

What I'm proposing is this: Take the existing, ad hoc system we use for treating the uninsured and turn it into a real integrated system. Specifically, mandate that everyone in America buy health insurance (with subsidies to those who can't afford the premiums), and then contract with assorted St. Elsewheres to serve the resulting pool of newly insured patients. The organizing blueprint of this new system would come from the one truly successful national health care system we currently have: the VA.

There's a funny thing about the VA. Among most Americans, it still has a reputation for mediocrity at best, and abysmal care at worst. Last spring, when the *Washington Post* reported on scandalous conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, many observers mistakenly saw the news as another black eye for the VA—not realizing that Walter Reed is in fact run by the Defense Department, an entirely separate cabinet agency. As for the VA, since its technology-driven transformation in the 1990s, those who use it love it. The VA has the highest rate of patient satisfaction of any health care delivery system in the United States, by far—higher even than fee-for-service Medicare, with its limitless choice of doctors. As readers of this magazine are likely to know (see "Best Care Anywhere," *Washington Monthly*, January/February 2005), the VA also comes out on top of virtually every study ranking the quality, safety, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness of U.S. health care providers.

As Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government gushed when awarding the VA a top prize in 2006 for innovation in government: "While the costs of health care continue to soar for most Americans, the VA is reducing costs, reducing errors, and becoming the model for what modern health care management and delivery should look like." In studies of health care quality, few private systems even come close to the VA.

So how is a supposedly sclerotic government agency with 198,000 employees from five separate unions outperforming the best the private market has to offer? In a word: incentives. Uniquely among U.S. health care providers, the VA has a near-lifetime relationship with its patients. This, in turn, gives it an institutional interest in preventing its patients from getting sick and in managing their long-term chronic illnesses effectively. If the VA doesn't get its prediabetic patients to eat right, exercise, and control their blood sugar, for example, it's on the hook down the road for the cost of their dialysis, amputations, blindness, and even possible long-term nursing home costs. Unlike the vast majority of American health care providers, the VA also has no incentive to perform unnecessary surgery or redundant tests. Where other health care providers make money by treating patients, the VA makes money by keeping them well.

The VA model is that rarest of health care beasts: one with a perfect alignment of interest between patients and providers. This is why, for example, the VA has emerged as the world leader in electronic medical records—and thus in the development of the evidence-based medicine these records make possible. For the rest of the American health care system, it makes little financial sense to invest in information technology and the systematic study of what treatments and drugs work best; precisely to the extent such investments improve the quality of care and make or keep people well, they dry up revenue. But for the VA, investments in quality make sense precisely because the system's financial interests are in sync with the health interests of its patients.

Virtually every health care plan rests on the assumption that the uninsured should be brought into the health care system the rest of us use. But what if something like the opposite is true?

Historically, to be sure, the VA has faced many challenges, and still does. Unlike Medicare and Social Security, it has no trust fund to ensure adequate and predictable funding. In building or closing hospitals it faces intense micromanagement from Congress. Its patients are older, poorer, and far more prone to addiction issues, traumatic injury, and chronic illness than the population as a whole. It is subject to intense and not always helpful scrutiny from the press, veterans-services organizations, and other special interest groups. It has to plan against imponderables that other health care providers can safely ignore, such as when and for how long America will go to war and what the physical and mental casualty rates will be. And while the VA is not a monopoly, many of its patients have little ability to switch to competing providers.

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Yet all these factors have not been enough to prevent the VA from emerging as the bright star of the American health care system by almost every conceivable metric, which ought to tell you something big. Particularly these days, when long-term chronic illnesses like diabetes are the dominant threat to the health of the population and the national bank account, a system of care under which the provider has a stake in the patients' long-term interest is the only sane way forward. If the 45 million uninsured Americans could be transitioned into a VA-style system, they would literally be getting the best care anywhere. And as news of that system's low costs and impressive results spread, more and more Americans would wonder why they, too, didn't have access to such a remarkable provider.

So how can we make that happen? The first step is to do what Mitt Romney has already done in Massachusetts, and what John Edwards says he will do nationally if he becomes president: make health insurance mandatory. Just as it is illegal in some states to drive and not have auto insurance, so too would it be illegal for any American not to have some kind of health insurance. Those who can't afford the cost would receive subsidies. But here's the twist: people not currently covered by private carriers or Medicare would have the option of receiving their care through a new network of providers that combines the best features of the VA.

The VA model is that rarest of health care beasts: one with a perfect alignment of interest between patients and providers.

For purposes of discussion, let's imagine that this new network took the name Vista Health Care Network, because it has been inspired by the VA's best-in-class VistA electronic medical record system and the high-quality model of care that the system makes possible. The slogan for the Vista Heath Care Network could be "Health for Life"—because Vista's prime long-term objective would be to offer Americans continuous and integrated lifetime care similar to that enjoyed by patients in the VA system.

Governance of the Vista network would be in the form of a board appointed by the president, whose members would not be subject to Senate confirmation and would serve staggered terms—in effect, a Federal Reserve Board of Medicine. The board's first task would be to approach various public and charitable hospitals around the country that face large loads of uninsured patients, and offer them a deal: Install the VA's VistA health information management software, and agree to adhere to the performance measures and protocols of evidence-based medicine used by the VA itself. In exchange, you'll get a contract to care for a guaranteed pool of people—who will be paid for. No longer will you have to provide uncompensated care to everyone who enters your emergency room. This pool would consist of those who can't afford private insurance and those on Medicaid. Reimbursement rates would be set much higher than in Medicaid, and when combined with the efficiency in the VA model of care, they'd be high enough to guarantee the solvency of participating hospitals.

It wouldn't be hard for the Vista board to find hospitals willing to take this deal. Across the country, hospitals serving the growing ranks of the uninsured are in financial crisis. Today, for example, Maryland's Prince George's County, outside of Washington, D.C., is in danger of losing its three hospitals largely because of their high volume of uninsured patients. Half of New Jersey's eighty-two hospitals run deficits, and the state is intent on closing most of them. For the past eight years, New York State's hospitals as a group have lost money, and under the terms of a special "hospital closure" commission, as many as a quarter will soon be gone.

Let's put ourselves in the shoes of people who manage, work for, or depend on one of these financially imperiled hospitals. Joining the Vista network would offer them a lifeline. Yes, the hospitals that take Vista's offer would have to radically change the way they do business. They'd have to join the twenty-first century and learn to use electronic medical records, which the vast majority of providers currently do not rely on. They'd also have to shed acute care beds and specialists and invest in more outpatient clinics—in which, for example, diabetics could learn how to manage their disease, or people with high blood pressure could join smoking-cessation programs. Doctors who work for these hospitals would no longer be constantly visited by pill salesmen, because decisions on what prescription drugs to use would be made on a scientific basis by the Vista board, and because the Vista network, like the VA, would negotiate as an institution to obtain the best prices from drug companies.

These and other changes would ruffle many feathers. But accepting the Vista deal means the hospital wouldn't have to close. Instead, the local community could take pride in having preserved an institution that not only serves the needy, but offers them high-quality, high-value health care as well. As long as the hospital demonstrably adhered to the VA's model of care, local politicians could continue to use it as a source of patronage, while local restaurants, stores, and real estate agents could continue to live off the income its employees spread through the community.

Now, let's put ourselves in the shoes of those who would be the customers of the new Vista system. One segment would be lower-income people, who, for the most part, are already frequenting various St. Elsewheres for their health

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care needs. For them, the transition to the new system would be easy and, indeed, welcome. They'd be going mostly to the same hospitals and clinics they're used to. But they would be able to get preventive care, like regular doctor checkups, as well as acute care, and not be hit with impossible-to-pay bills that could force them into bankruptcy.

A second segment of Vista customers would be people—mostly young—who currently lack insurance because they're students or work for companies that don't offer it, and because they're healthy enough to feel that they don't need it. These people might not like being forced to buy insurance. But given that they'd have to, they'd likely see the Vista network as an attractive option because of its low cost and its nationwide presence, which would mean they wouldn't have to change health care plans when they move. Younger people, too, are more likely than their parents and grandparents to recognize the benefits of electronic medical records, and the evidence-based care they make possible.

In the short term, this new Vista system would offer acceptable care to every American who currently lacks health insurance—a better deal than they're getting now. Over time, as the reforms imposed on the participating hospitals and clinics began to take effect, the quality of that health care would improve, and, as word spreads, Vista's popularity should increase even more. (Remember, the VA has the highest rate of patient satisfaction of any health care provider in the United States.)

For all this to work, Vista would need to have what the VA already enjoys: a lifetime relationship with the bulk of its patients, so that its financial incentives were in line with its patients' health needs. This could happen with a relatively modest legal fix: any person in the Vista system who gets a job with health insurance should be allowed to direct his or her company to pay premiums to the Vista system if that person wants to remain in the system. And, presuming the system worked well, most people would want to stay in it, given its national reach and the strong desire most of us have not to have to constantly change doctors and health plans.

Finally, let's put ourselves in the shoes of Beltway politicians. Sometime around January 2009, they're probably going to have to decide which—if any—of the proposals for universal health care floating around Washington they're willing to support. The Vista plan offers several politically comforting advantages.

First, unlike the 1993 Clinton health care plan, the Vista proposal does not directly take on the medical/industrial complex. It would not require any changes to the private insurance market, for instance, or place any costly mandates on employers. At least in the short term, Vista would be focused on customers who aren't now part of the private health insurance market.

Second, Vista should garner a wider array of political allies. Many private hospitals and doctors are likely to welcome the program, because it would relieve them of the burden of having to provide uncompensated care to the uninsured. Doctors working within the Vista system would also be free of the hassle of having to file claims to third-party payers and, as in the case of VA doctors, would not bear the burden of paying for medical malpractice insurance. Almost any universal health care proposal could hope to attract these kinds of allies—but Vista would rally an additional set. Every lawmaker who has a costly or failing public hospital in his or her district (and most do) will have a built-in constituency of local politicians, newspapers, medical professionals, and community activists who will see Vista as the best way to save their local institution.

The third political advantage is price. If Vista worked like the VA, it would almost certainly be the lowest-cost route to decent health care for all the uninsured. High-quality health care is also low-cost health care, especially over the long term, as the effects of prevention and evidence-based medicine pay off. Precise costs are difficult to calculate because of differences in the populations served, but consider this figure: for every patient who transfers from Medicare to the VA, taxpayers save about one-third, while the patient, on average, gets higher-quality care.

If the 45 million uninsured Americans could be transitioned into a VA-style system, they would literally be getting the best care anywhere. And as news of that system's low costs and impressive results spread, more and more Americans would wonder why they, too, didn't have access to such a remarkable provider.

In addition to employing the VA's cost-control strategy, Vista would have other means of limiting its impact on taxpayers. Much of the money to pay for the Vista system would come from people who currently don't have insurance but, because of the individual mandate, would have to pay at least something up front to defray the cost of their care. What subsidies the Vista system would require would also be largely offset by the forty-some billion dollars in federal, state, and local government spending that goes to treat the uninsured under the current highly inefficient, ad

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hoc system. Nor would creating a Vista Health Care Network require the government to incur huge capital costs or long-term debt. Though the network would have to build some of its own hospitals and clinics in certain underserved locations, most Vista-affiliated facilities would remain owned and operated by the private interests, charity organizations, and local governments that currently run them. Vista's role in these hospitals and clinics would be analogous to that of a franchiser: setting and enforcing standards, and achieving economies of scale in technology, purchasing, information management, and marketing.

By building on a system that already exists, then, the Vista plan would be the least costly and, initially, the least disruptive way to provide health care for the uninsured (and high-quality care, at that). But that doesn't mean conservatives and health care lobbyists won't go after Vista. They will. For while Vista would not, in the short run, pose a challenge to the private-sector health care market, in the long run it's a different story.

Again, the VA experience is instructive. Thanks to quality improvements, many veterans not currently qualified for VA health care benefits are demanding access to VA hospitals. Among the American Legion's top legislative priorities this year is to allow veterans on Medicare to be able to receive their treatment at the VA.

Similarly, imagine that Vista is put into place and works as advertised. Over time, word gets out that the quality of treatment in Vista is pretty good—indeed, better than what most people with employer-provided health care receive. Pretty soon, individuals who are not eligible for Vista start clamoring for the right to buy into the system. And employers, realizing that Vista is doing a better job of controlling costs than their own private-sector health providers, start pressuring Washington for permission to contract with Vista to provide health care for their employees.

If this kind of competition were allowed to happen, private health care companies would either lose customers to Vista or be forced to find ways to curb overtreatment, reduce medical errors, and in general provide better, more cost-efficient care. Either way, the competition would lead to dramatic improvements in American health care. Just as the existence of state universities puts competitive pressure on private universities to pursue excellence, the existence of the Vista network would force the rest of the health care system to try matching it on quality and value.

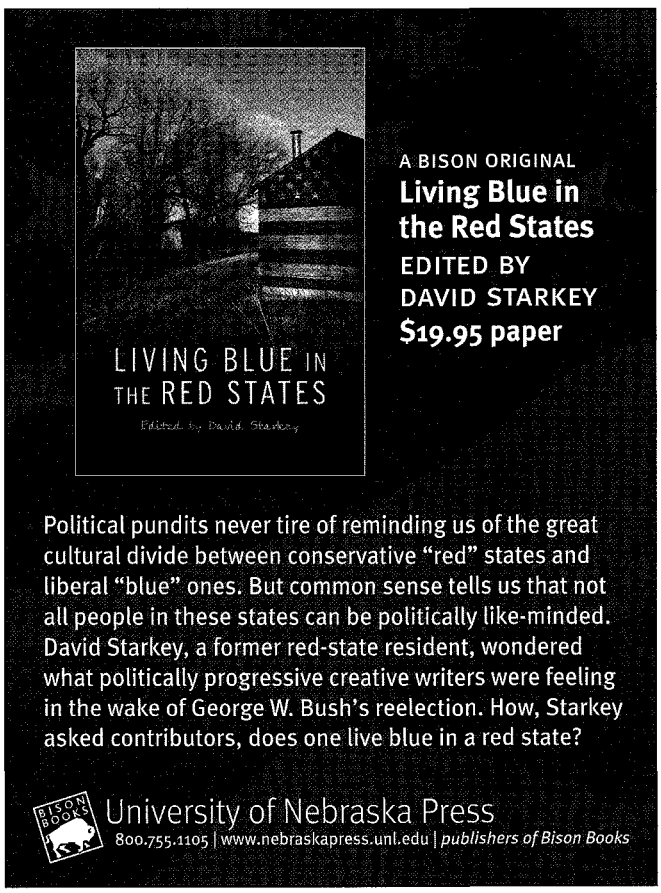
Conservatives and health care lobbyists can be expected, of course, to denounce anyone who supports the Vista plan as advocates of "socialized medicine." They would do the same to any serious attempt to provide universal health care. The difference is that with Vista, it may be harder to make that case stick in the public mind.

For one thing, the model for Vista comes not from Canada or France, but from the U.S. military. Is the health care system we provide our troops really "socialism"? Also, the competition that the industry is worried about will happen—if it happens—down the road, only if Vista turns out to be a big success, and only if elected officials later decide to open up the system. The Vista program that today's politicians would be voting on would not alter the health care most Americans have—and this is a major political advantage.

In reality, "socialized medicine" is not the phrase to use when describing the Vista system. Nor is "single payer." The plan would expand the role of government in health care and achieve universal access, but no one would be compelled by law to join the Vista network, just as no one is compelled to receive treatment at the VA. In replicating the best features of the VA, Vista might offer the best care anywhere, but its existence would not erode our all-American right to make bad choices in health care.

Yes, there is a solution to the health care crisis. It starts with the comparatively limited step of creating a high-quality health care delivery system for the uninsured, as opposed to simply throwing more money in their direction or mounting an all-at-once overhaul of the entire health care sector. It ends with future generations of Americans wondering why we took so long to open our hearts and our minds and create the Vista "Health for Life" network. WM

Phillip Longman, a Schwartz senior fellow at the New America Foundation, is author of *Best Care Anywhere: Why VA Health Care Is Better Than Yours.*



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Newtered

Gingrich's Congress emasculated the one agency capable of controlling health care costs and improving quality. Time to reverse the procedure.

By Shannon Brownlee

If you've never suffered the agony of low back pain, don't worry—chances are you will. About two-thirds of adults are hit with low back pain at some time in their lives, and for many the pain is sufficiently unbearable to send them hobbling into the doctor's office. Yet although back pain is one of the most common conditions around, and although it costs billions of dollars each year in lost productivity, doctors still disagree over everything from how to diagnose the cause to what to do about it. The vast majority of low back pain—even the excruciating nerve sensation known as sciatica—goes away, inexplicably, on its own. There's little evidence that the two most common surgical treatments, known as spinal fusion and discectomy, are necessarily better than such nonsurgical remedies as over-the-counter painkillers and physical therapy. Practically every aspect of back pain, from the terminology to various treatments to the imaging tests, like MRIs and X-rays, used to diagnose it, is fraught with confusion and controversy.

That's why a federal office known as the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research (AHCPR) impaneled a group of twenty-three experts in 1993 to draft guidelines to help doctors figure out how best to treat low back pain. The AHCPR was created in 1989 during the first Bush administration. Its mandate was to produce evidence-based, clinical-practice guidelines that would help physicians sort through the conflicting data that existed not just for low back pain, but for many other common treatments and tests. Then, as now, the nation's medical bill was rising at an alarming rate, in part due to widespread, inappropriate use of unnecessary or useless treatments. Democrats and Republicans alike hoped that the AHCPR's research would help rein in costs by giving doctors better direction, and offering payers—especially Medicare—the ammunition they needed to make evidence-based coverage decisions. More significantly, the agency promised to improve the quality of health care by helping to ensure that doctors would give patients the treatments they really needed—and refrain from giving them care that could harm them.

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But when the AHCPR's panel concluded that there was little evidence to support surgery as a first-line treatment for low back pain, and that doctors and patients would be wise to try nonsurgical interventions first, back surgeons went wild. They knew that once the AHCPR's guidelines were published, Medicare might limit reimbursement for various back surgeries to patients who were enrolled in a controlled clinical trial designed to test the efficacy of the procedure. If the study showed that a surgery was no better than nonsurgical remedies, or only about as good, there was a chance that Medicare would stop reimbursing for it. If Medicare made a back surgery provisional, private insurers were likely to follow.

Sensing a threat to their livelihoods, many surgeons bombarded Congress with letters contending that the agency's panel was biased. One doctor, Neil Kahanovitz, founded the Center for Patient Advocacy, a nonprofit that orchestrated a sustained lobbying campaign against the entire agency. A company that manufactures pedicle screws (devices that are sometimes used during spinal fusion) sought a court injunction to prevent publication of the guidelines. The North American Spine Society, the main professional group for back surgeons, launched an assault on the methods used by the AHCPR experts, charging that the agency had wasted taxpayer dollars on the study.

Their arguments found a sympathetic ear in Newt Gingrich's newly elected Republican majority in the House. The back surgeons' anger at the AHCPR's efforts to discipline medical practice resonated with the Republican fervor for reducing government, and with the party's ideological antipathy for federal interference in what they imagined as a free market. The agency's name soon appeared on a House Budget Committee "hit list" of 140 federal programs targeted for elimination. (The list also included the congressional Office of Technology Assessment, which evaluated the effectiveness of medical technology.) The Republicans saw the AHCPR as a wasteful government agency, and in 1995 the House voted to eliminate its funding, calling it the "Agency for High Cost Publications and Research."

Eventually, the agency was rescued with the help of a handful of Republican supporters in the Senate, but it suffered a 21 percent cut of its already meager $159 million budget. Sensing the agency was still vulnerable, its director worked with moderate Senate Republicans to protect the agency by downshifting its mission. Now, the AHCPR would merely be a "clearinghouse" for data, which meant it could no longer offer Medicare explicit guidance when it came time to determine which tests, treatments, and procedures to cover. The word "policy," which smacked of the failed Clinton health care plan, was expunged from its name, and the AHCPR became the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ).

The back panel's guidelines were published in 1994, but they were ignored by many surgeons who were perhaps emboldened by the Republican smack-down of the AHCPR. Last year, we spent more than $16 billion on back surgeries, and, in the past decade, surgeons have been performing spinal fusions at a furious rate, even though there still has never been a rigorous, independently funded clinical trial showing that going under the knife is superior to cheaper, less invasive remedies. At the same time, the nation's total health care bill continues to skyrocket, propelled in no small measure by procedures that are equally as questionable as spinal fusion. In 2000, America spent $1.3 trillion, a figure that nearly doubled to an estimated $2.1 trillion by 2006. In the view of Peter Orzag, head of the Congressional Budget Office, this has put the U.S. on "an unsustainable fiscal path."

Of course, some of our money is going toward new treatments and tests that help Americans live longer and healthier lives. However, as much as 30 cents on every health care dollar is spent on unnecessary care—or "overtreatment," in medicalspeak. That may sound odd after all we've heard from people like Michael Moore about how everybody from your hospital to your insurer is getting rich by denying you care you need. Yet both problems exist simultaneously. All too often, patients don't get necessary medical treatment. At the same time, we risk being given stuff that not only doesn't improve our health but which may actually harm us. One estimate suggests that as many as 30,000 Medicare recipients die prematurely each year from unnecessary care.

This overtreatment is due in part to an excess supply of medical resources—hospital beds, intensive care units, specialists, CT scanners—in many parts of the country. But it is also the result of our national failure to fund the research that could show what works in medicine, what doesn't, and for which patients—and then to train doctors to understand that research and use it. Our current fee-for-service payment system, which pays hospitals and doctors for each hospitalization, office visit, procedure, test, and surgery performed, simply gives providers an incentive to adopt anything that's well reimbursed, regardless of whether it actually helps patients. Medicare pays for practically anything that physicians deem "medically necessary," much of which, from spinal fusion to a fancy new imaging scan for Alzheimer's, remains unproven by anything resembling good scientific evidence. We've been set back a decade in reforming this system, thanks in part to the handiwork of Gingrich's House.

With the Democrats back in power in Congress, there's bipartisan talk once again of resurrecting an agency that would do much of what the AHCPR was supposed to accomplish before its brush with death. The three leading Democratic presidential candidates have put evidence-based medicine at the center of their health care proposals, along with the need for what Mark McClellan, former secretary of Health and Human Services, calls a "fee-for-value" payment system, rather than the current fee-for-service system. The House recently approved a bill to expand the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) to cover uninsured children that includes a provision for funding comparative effectiveness research—a bill that President Bush has vowed to veto. Meanwhile, Americans are paying an estimated $400 billion to $700 billion a year for medical care that isn't doing them any good.

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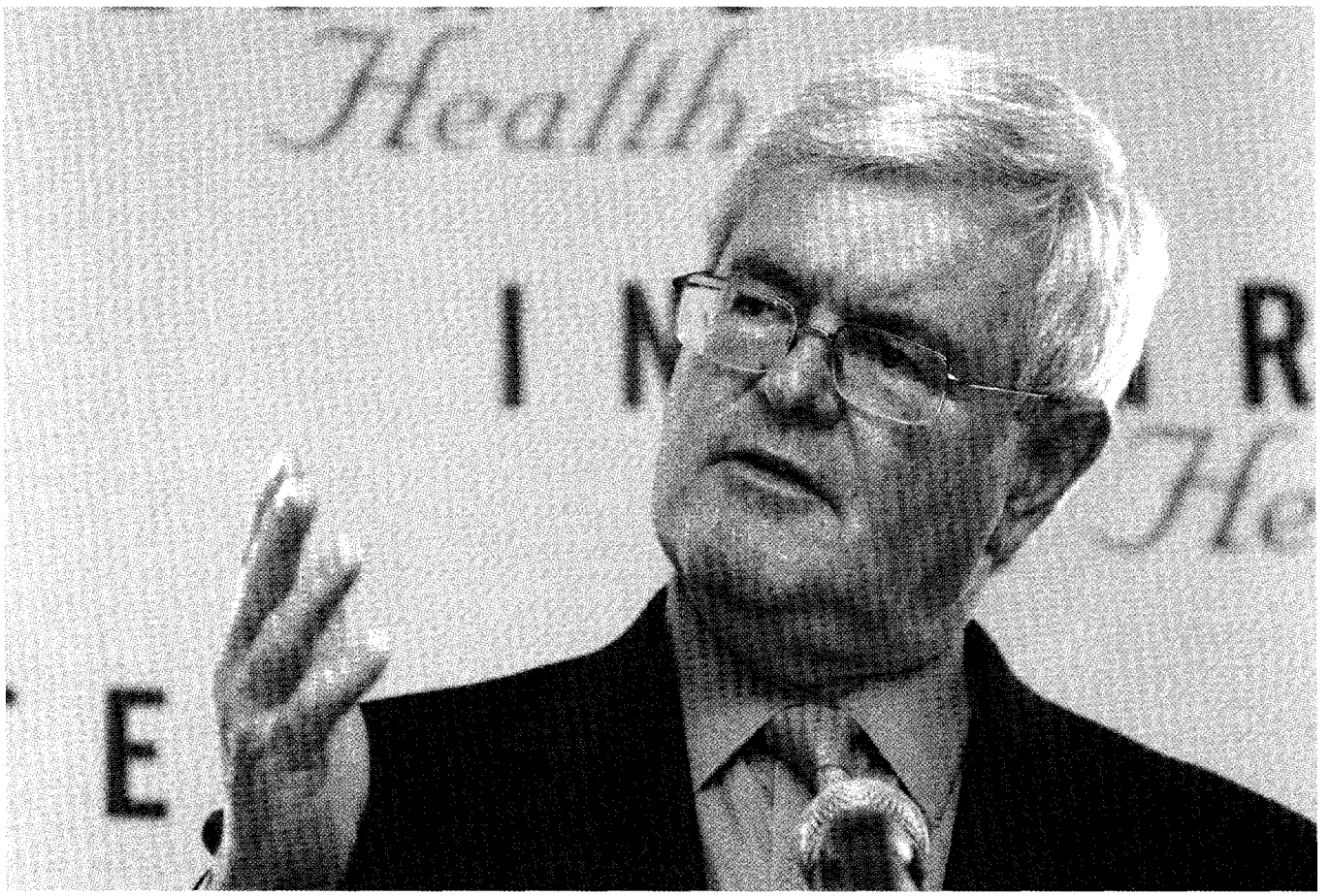

AP Photo / The Oklahoman, Paul Heilstern

Most of us can't imagine that medicine isn't based on good evidence. We live in the age of medical miracles, after all, of organ transplants, brain surgery, pacemakers, and artificial hips and knees, not to mention drugs that can treat everything from high blood pressure to AIDS. Surely doctors adopt medical advances only on the basis of sound science. Right?

Well, not exactly. For starters, there is surprisingly little government oversight of medical practice. The Food and Drug Administration, which many people imagine oversees it, in fact only regulates the marketing of drugs and devices. Before a drug can get on the market, its manufacturer must generally demonstrate that it is relatively safe and more effective than a placebo to alleviate a narrow set of conditions, or "indication."

Once a drug is approved by the agency, however, physicians can prescribe it for any condition or ailment they deem appropriate. This is called "off-label" use. For many drugs, off-label prescriptions for conditions that were not included in the studies that led to FDA approval make up the majority of sales. Most of the time, this is perfectly fine. Few antibiotics have been approved for use in children, but nobody would fault a pediatrician who prescribed one off-label for a child with bronchitis. The FDA has no say in this aspect of medical practice except to restrain drug companies from marketing off-label uses of their products. That means that Merck couldn't advertise Vioxx—a painkiller originally approved to treat rheumatoid arthritis—to treat tennis elbow, but doctors were free to prescribe it to anybody they pleased. By the time Vioxx was pulled from the market, it was estimated to have killed more Americans than were killed in the Korean War.

When it comes to medical procedures, the FDA has zero authority to make sure they actually work. If your surgeon wants to try removing your appendix through your back, that's between you and your surgeon and the hospital. And if other surgeons think that sounds like a promising idea, nobody oversees what they do except their fellow surgeons. This might sound weird, but it's the way medicine has worked for millennia. To develop new treatments, pioneering doctors and scientists often have to take risks. For instance, in the 1960s, Christiaan Barnard thought it might be possible to take the heart from a recently deceased patient and let that heart give new life to another—a radical idea at the time. He was right, and the practice has continued. Of course, a lot of patients die along the path toward perfecting a new procedure, but more significantly, there's no systematic effort made to ensure a new technique is actually an improvement over the old ones. Medical devices like pedicle screws and implantable hips and pacemakers lie somewhere between the regulation afforded by the FDA over drugs and the lack of oversight of medical practice.

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What this means for both doctors and patients is that there is little reliable information about most things doctors do. The FDA does not require that a new drug be an improvement over other medicines that are already on the market, and the drug industry does not routinely conduct valid (translation: likely to be true) trials that compare one drug to another. When it does fund such comparative effectiveness trials, they are often so woefully biased that the results are meaningless; the drug manufactured by the funder of the study generally comes out on top. And the drug industry rarely, if ever, funds studies examining whether its products are superior to nonpharmaceutical forms of treatment—antidepressants versus therapy, for instance.

You can't blame them. Good clinical trials can cost millions of dollars to conduct and take years to complete, and the pharmaceutical industry is in the business of selling drugs, not increasing medical knowledge for the betterment of society. The job of ensuring that medical practices are actually helping patients should fall to a scientifically credible, disinterested body, an institution that might look a lot like the AHCPR would now if not for its near-death experience in 1996.

The National Institutes of Health and the Veterans Health Administration can generally be relied upon to fund well-designed trials, but the trick is getting them to do them. Though the VHA conducts some of the best clinical research around, the agency is woefully underfunded and can't be expected to accomplish very much. The NIH, on the other hand, with its nearly $30 billion budget, is in a position to systematically work through the research that's necessary to improve the practice of medicine. But the institutes devote only a small fraction of their budgets to comparative effectiveness studies. That's largely an effect of NIH institutional culture, which is focused on the basic science of disease and searching for sexy new cures, and less inclined toward the more humdrum science of comparative effectiveness: as the NIH director recently remarked, "We don't do Coke versus Pepsi." Consequently, getting the NIH to fund a comparative effectiveness study can be an arduous task for concerned physicians and patient advocacy groups, who often must lean on the institutes, sometimes for years, before trials are mounted.

Among the few comparative effectiveness trials NIH has funded, several have shown the surgical procedure or drug or test in question to be less miraculous than doctors and patients believed. For example, surgeons long assumed that a radical mastectomy for breast cancer, removing not just the breast but the underlying chest muscle and the lymph nodes under the arm, was the only way to get every last cancer cell. Then a massive, multimillion-dollar clinical trial launched by the NIH in the 1990s found that lumpectomy with radiation was just as effective, not to mention less traumatic for many women. Many patients and doctors also fervently believed that high-dose chemotherapy was a woman's best hope when she had advanced breast cancer. The brutal regimen was used for twenty years before clinical trials finally demonstrated that it was no more effective than standard, far less punishing doses of chemo. During those twenty years, an estimated 9,000 women were killed not by their cancer, but by the high-dose treatment. And the most recent example of a dramatic upset: a VA study, released earlier this year, which found that angioplasty and cardiac stents are no better at preventing a heart attack than so-called "medical management"—that is, getting patients with risk factors for heart disease to lose weight, exercise, and take medicines to lower their high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

There are two conclusions to be drawn from all of this. One, doctors are making a lot of decisions about how to treat their patients without the benefit of data. One day medical historians will look back at many current medical practices and see twenty-first-century equivalents of bloodletting and leeches. According to the Institute of Medicine, perhaps half of medical practice is based on valid evidence. Dr. David Eddy, an expert in the field of medical evidence, thinks as little as 15 percent of what doctors do is based in good science. Or, as he recently told *BusinessWeek,* "The problem is, we don't know what we're doing."

Two, it seems completely crazy for a country that spends so much on health care to spend so little on systematically filling the gaps in medical knowledge. Of our more than $2 trillion national health care bill, we devote less than one-tenth of 1 percent to answering the myriad questions about what actually works in medicine. What's the best way to get people to lose weight and exercise in order to prevent heart disease and diabetes? Nobody knows. Is a cesarean section necessary if a woman's previous child was delivered by cesarean? Can a million-dollar da Vinci surgical robot, touted by many hospitals that have purchased the device, really improve outcomes, or is it just a fancy way to spend money? If a man has prostate cancer, which remedy is best? There are four different surgeries, several types of implantable radioactive seeds, and multiple external radiation regimens to choose from. Macular degeneration, a disease that causes blindness in 200,000 Americans each year, can be treated with one of two drugs, Lucentis or Avastin, but there's no head-to-head evidence to show which one is better, or which one is best for a particular patient.

If we had answers to these questions and many others, we could begin to improve care and control spiraling health care costs. Unproven new technologies are among the primary drivers of rising costs, and it's worth looking at one specific example to see how the lack of valid evidence is pushing our medical bill skyward: spinal fusion surgery. Spinal fusion surgery serves as the poster child for much of what's wrong with the current debate over what to do about health care costs; it may, according to Dr. Jerome Groopman, be "the radical mastectomy of our time."

In use since the 1950s, spinal fusion surgery can offer tremendous relief to patients suffering from spinal fractures and tumors of the spine, where vertebrae have been displaced and threaten to crush the spinal cord. But such cases make up only a tiny fraction of the more than 300,000 spinal

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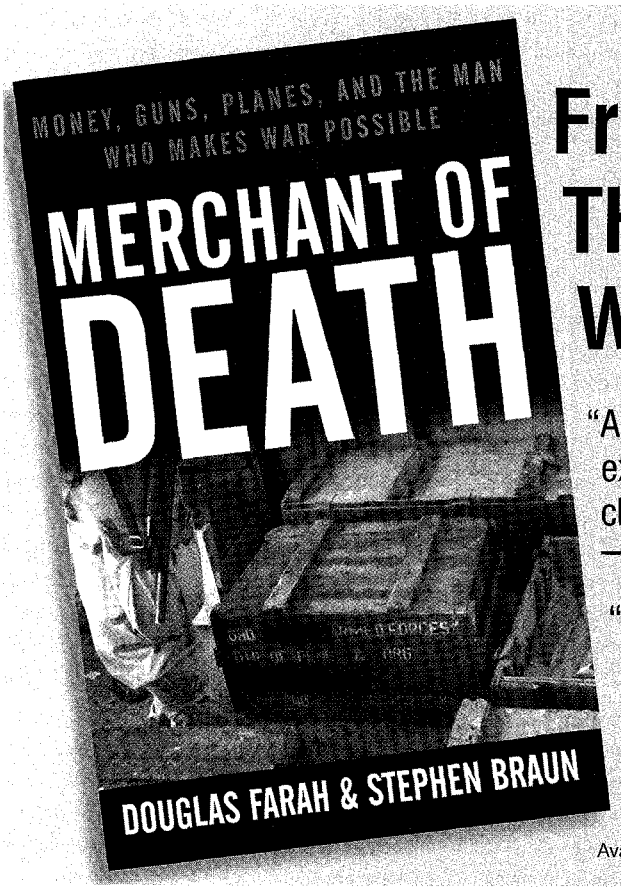
fusions that are performed each year. Most are done on patients with "simple low back pain," in medical parlance, even though there's nothing simple about either the diagnosis or the treatment. About 85 percent of patients with low back pain can't be given a precise diagnosis, says Dr. Richard Deyo, a back expert at the University of Washington in Seattle and coauthor of *Hope or Hype: The Obsession With Medical Advances and the High Cost of False Promises*. But that doesn't stop doctors who have trained in different disciplines from viewing back pain through their own diagnostic lens. In a paper titled "Who You See Is What You Get," Deyo, who was one of the members of the AHCPR panel that looked at back treatment in the 1990s, and his coauthors found that rheumatologists tended to give patients with low back pain blood tests, to look for rare immunological disorders. Neurologists performed tests of how well nerves conducted impulses along the spine. Surgeons ordered MRIs and CT scans, which show the anatomy of the bones and soft tissue in the back.

When an MRI or a CT scan shows a degenerated or worn-out disk, fusion surgery is often the recommended treatment. The logic seems pretty obvious. You can think of a disk in your back as resembling a doughnut, which gets compressed and squeezed between the vertebrae over time. A worn-out disc may cause abnormal movement between vertebrae that generates pain. To fix the problem, the surgeon removes the offending disk, then fills the gap left between the two vertebrae with bone chips harvested from cadavers or the patient's own hip. The chips are intended to "fuse" the vertebrae so they don't collapse together and squeeze the spinal cord. Sometimes surgeons use pedicle screws, a gizmo that is attached to the two vertebrae above and below the space emptied by the removed disk, in order to hold them in place.

But it turns out that a worn-out disk may not necessarily be the source of the person's pain. Studies of CT scans have shown that 20 percent of people under the age of forty have a degenerated disk but don't have any back pain. A study using MRIs found that 36 percent of people over sixty had herniated disks, and more than 80 percent showed disk degeneration (bulges and narrow bits), but had no significant back pain. Research has found that the vast majority of people with back pain will recover within a few weeks if they take anti-inflammatory pain medication like ibuprofen, rest for a short period, and get physical therapy.

Even for patients who don't get better on their own, spinal fusion may not be the best remedy. In the past, not one of the dozens of studies that looked at the procedure definitively showed which patients are likely to be helped, and whether or not surgery is as at least as good, if not superior, to nonsurgical treatment like physical therapy and pain medication to keep the patient comfortable while the back heals on its own. This is because the right kind of trial comparing surgery to other remedies had never been performed.

Never, that is, until earlier this year, when Dr. James Weinstein, the chair of orthopedic surgery at Dartmouth Medical



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School, released results from the Spine Patient Outcomes Research Trial, or SPORT, which was sponsored by the NIH. The best-designed and best-executed study of back surgery ever conducted, SPORT still can't say for sure that surgery is significantly better than nonsurgical remedies for all low back pain. In part, this is because Weinstein's study only looked at one condition that causes back pain, something called spondylolisthesis. The study didn't attempt to address the most common reason surgeons do spinal fusions, degenerated disks. For spondylolisthesis, SPORT suggests that spinal fusion might be a little better than nonsurgical remedies. Studies of spinal fusion that have looked at degenerated disks, many of them from Europe, can't say much. "Even if you take all of the research at face value, you have to conclude that spinal fusion is only modestly effective," says Rick Deyo. "It's not a slam dunk." Back pain patients would probably do well to think about that, because the surgery they're about to undergo poses real risks, including infection, continuing pain, pseudoarthrosis, a condition called "failed back syndrome," and occasionally even death.

Between 1997—three years after the AHCPR's guidelines were published—and 2006, the number of spinal fusions went up 127 percent, from a little more than 100,000 a year to 303,000 annually. But if surgeons don't know which patients are most likely to benefit, or even that surgery is going to be much better than what Weinstein calls "the tincture of time," why have they been performing more spinal fusions, only a small fraction of which are on patients with conditions that have been shown to be likely to benefit? Well, for starters, the surgery is one of the most lucrative procedures in medicine, for both hospitals and physicians—according to the AHRQ, median hospital charges are $42,000 per case. The surgeon's reimbursement from Medicare is about $4,000, and private insurers may pay more. Back surgeons can easily earn $1 million to $2 million a year. We spend an additional $2.5 billion annually on fusion hardware like pedicle screws, which can add thousands of dollars to the price of a surgery. Yet there's practically no evidence to show all those screws improve outcomes either.

When it comes to medical procedures, the FDA has zero authority to make sure they actually work. If your surgeon wants to try removing your appendix through your back, that's between you and your surgeon and the hospital.

But money is only one of the factors driving the large number of fusion surgeries. Patients want surgery, often because a friend found relief from it, or because they think their excruciating pain can't possibly be cured without doing something drastic. And many surgeons believe in their heart of hearts that they are doing God's work relieving pain, secure in their genuine conviction that research supports them.

If the fact that your average back surgeon is operating unfettered by data leaves you feeling a little nervous, here's an even more disturbing thought: most physicians don't even know how poor the evidence is. Pressed for time, physicians often skim the medical journals, reading only the abstracts and conclusions of articles and missing the clues buried inside that show that the research was either poorly designed or the results were incorrectly interpreted. Even doctors who want to be more discerning "have no idea how to evaluate the medical literature," says Dr. Michael Stuart. "Because they were never taught."

Stuart spent twenty-five years as a family practice physician at Group Health Cooperative, in Seattle, Washington, before he quit to launch a consulting company consisting of himself and Sheri Ann Strite, a former research coordinator at Group Health with extensive experience designing clinical research protocols. Calling themselves "clinical usefulness detectives," the pair teach doctors how to think more analytically about medical science. In 2006, they spent three days with a group of back surgeons in Boise, Idaho, the spinal fusion capital of the United States. In 2003, surgeons in Boise performed 8.2 back surgeries per 1,000 Medicare enrollees in the surrounding population, over twice the national average. "I think the whole mountain region has a lot of orthopedists and spine surgeons," says Douglas Dammrose, senior vice president and medical director at BlueCross Idaho. "They're outdoorsy types. They like to ski."

Stuart and Strite led a group of spine surgeons and physiatrists (doctors who specialize in physical therapy) through a course intended to teach them how to pick apart medical research. They started the group out easy, with studies that were clearly biased or that did not include enough patients to come to a statistically significant result. The surgeons learned quickly, and by the third day were eager to examine the studies they themselves chose as the best evidence available for spinal fusion surgery.

Not one of the studies, it turns out, was scientifically rigorous enough to be considered valid evidence that spinal fusion is superior to nonsurgical remedies. (The SPORT trial had not yet been reported.) "It was quite an eye-opening experience for them," says Stuart. In one of the studies the surgeons chose, a reanalysis of the data showed that fifty-four out of 109 patients who got nonsurgical treatment felt better after one year, as compared to fifty-five out of 109 patients who felt better after receiving surgery—not exactly a ringing endorsement.

After dissecting all of their studies, the surgeons sat in stunned silence. "Somebody said, 'Wow, we've gone through

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everything we've relied on,'" Stuart recalls. One doctor threw up his hands. It seemed to Stuart and Strite as if the physicians, in recognizing that the evidence for their craft was lacking, were going through the stages of grief. One surgeon seemed sad. Another said the studies had to be wrong—he just *knew* he was relieving his patients' pain. Later, a doctor confronted Stuart in the hall, saying angrily that he didn't have time to read the journals, and it was unreasonable to expect physicians to spend their weekends critically evaluating the literature.

In some ways, the angry back surgeon was right. Since most doctors aren't trained to evaluate the literature, it's probably foolish—especially given their pecuniary interests—to expect them to resist the urge to give patients unproven treatments on the basis of doubts buried in the footnotes of journal articles. It's even more foolish if studies that could demonstrate the true value of a treatment, test, or drug haven't even been done.

All of which points to the need for a national strategy for improving the evidence base of medicine. We need an independant agency that would fund systematic reviews of the medical literature, as well as clinical trials to test the comparative effectiveness of everything from drugs to treatments. An agency that could help Medicare and other payers know what to cover, and what's still experimental. An agency, in short, that would look a lot like the AHCPR probably would today if it hadn't been derailed in 1996.

It doesn't much matter who does it, as long as the job gets done. It could be a new institute, as Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have called for. The NIH could take it on, provided the director could be persuaded that testing existing treatments is as important as finding new cures. Or, it could be a beefed-up version of the AHRQ. For argument's sake, let's give it a new name—the Agency for Clinical Effectiveness, or ACE.

The first thing such an agency would need is independence to render sound medical judgment without political interference. Just this August, the *Washington Post* reported that the Department of Health and Human Services, under heavy pressure from the infant formula industry, had buried the AHRQ's comprehensive finding that breast-feeding leads to better health in babies. To prevent this kind of thing from happening, the ACE would need the kind of political insulation afforded the Federal Reserve Board, which is able to set sound monetary policy partly because it is largely immune from congressional pressure. One way to do that would be to create an advisory board of three to six members whose presidential appointments lasted six years and ended in a staggered fashion, so no one president could clean house. No more than a third of the board should come from industry. The board would help the agency set research priorities for performing appraisals of existing data and for funding new clinical studies.

Such studies wouldn't come cheap. But there is already a plan on the table to pay for them. A bipartisan House bill proposed in June would raise $3 billion in federal and private money to fund comparative effectiveness trials over the next five years. This would amount to less than three-hundredths of 1 percent of what we are expected to spend on health care in that same interval.

The agency would have an immediate effect on the quality of health care simply by serving as a source of valid clinical data, and making its research findings readily accessible to payers, doctors, and the public. In order to start bringing down costs, however, the ACE would also need the power to make recommendations to Medicare about what to reimburse. On the basis of current evidence for spinal fusion, for example, the ACE might advise Medicare to pay for surgeries that are clearly needed, as in cases of spinal tumors, and to reimburse provisionally only after a patient has failed to get relief from nonsurgical treatment.

Such research won't be greeted with open arms. Specialists that make money off expensive procedures may not welcome research that could hurt their incomes; many people on both the right and the left view any effort by government to oversee medical practice as nothing more than a poorly disguised attempt to save money by denying care.

But the most sustained resistance to establishing the ACE is likely to come from device and drug makers. Already, medical manufacturers are quietly trying to undermine provisions in the SCHIP bill to fund comparative effectiveness research. Their argument goes something like this: the high profits we earn today are the engine that drives the cures of tomorrow, and anything that threatens those profits could kill medical innovation.

But is this true? Other industries, like high tech, manage to remain innovative on far lower margins than the 20 percent and 30 percent enjoyed by, respectively, the pharmaceutical industry and the implantable device makers. It's hard to imagine that better information would seriously impair either industry, though it will undoubtedly hurt some manufacturers and might even put some small device makers out of business—freeing up capital for the creation of new companies and better products.

The most likely result of technology assessment and comparative effectiveness research is that it will bring about a more efficient market in medicine. Right now, most devices and drugs command exorbitant prices in the U.S., regardless of their actual benefit to our health. And many procedures and tests are being reimbursed without evidence that they are doing patients any good. If an agency such as the ACE were empowered to produce meaningful research, we would no longer wind up paying top dollar for medical technologies and treatments that aren't significantly better than cheaper alternatives—or, to put it more simply, doing the equivalent of paying Mercedes-Benz prices for a Chevy. That's an argument that even Newt Gingrich ought to agree with. WM

Shannon Brownlee is a Schwartz senior fellow at the New America Foundation and the author of *Overtreated: Why Too Much Medicine Is Making Us Sicker and Poorer*, from which this article is adapted.

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The Myth of AQI

Fighting al-Qaeda in Iraq is the last big argument for keeping U.S. troops in the country. But the military's estimation of the threat is alarmingly wrong.

By Andrew Tilghman

AFP / Getty Images

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In March 2007, a pair of truck bombs tore through the Shiite marketplace in the northern Iraqi city of Tal Afar, killing more than 150 people. The blast reduced the ancient city center to rubble, leaving body parts and charred vegetables scattered amid pools of blood. It was among the most lethal attacks to date in the five-year-old Iraq War. Within hours, Iraqi officials in Baghdad had pinned the bombing on al-Qaeda, and news reports from Reuters, the BBC, MSNBC, and others carried those remarks around the world. An Internet posting by the terrorist group known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) took credit for the destruction. Within a few days, U.S. Army General David Petraeus publicly blamed AQI for the carnage, accusing the group of trying to foment sectarian violence and ignite a civil war. Back in Washington, pundits latched on to the attack with special interest, as President Bush had previously touted a period of calm in Tal Afar as evidence that the military's retooled counterinsurgency doctrine was working. For days, reporters and bloggers debated whether the attacks signaled a "resurgence" of al-Qaeda in the city.

The view that AQI is neither as big nor as lethal as commonly believed is widespread among intelligence analysts on the ground and in Washington. But their voices are lost in an echo chamber of powerful players all with an interest in hyping AQI's role.

Yet there's reason to doubt that AQI had any role in the bombing. In the weeks before the attack, sectarian tensions had been simmering after a local Sunni woman told Al Jazeera television that she had been gang-raped by a group of Shiite Iraqi army soldiers. Multiple insurgent groups called for violence to avenge the woman's honor. Immediately after the blast, some in uniform expressed doubts about al-Qaeda's alleged role and suggested that homegrown sectarian strife was more likely at work. "It's really not al-Qaeda who has infiltrated so much as the fact [of] what happened in 2003," said Ahmed Hashim, a professor at the Naval War College who served as an Army political adviser to the 3rd Cavalry Regiment in Tal Afar until shortly before the bombing. "The formerly dominant Sunni Turkmen majority there," he told PBS's *NewsHour With Jim Lehrer* soon after the bombing, "suddenly ... felt themselves having been thrown out of power. And this is essentially their revenge."

A week later, Iraqi security forces raided a home outside Tal Afar and arrested two men suspected of orchestrating the bombing. Yet when the U.S. military issued a press release about the arrests, there was no mention of an al-Qaeda connection. The suspects were never formally charged, and nearly six months later neither the U.S. military nor Iraqi police are certain of the source of the attacks. In recent public statements, the military has backed off its former allegations that al-Qaeda was responsible, instead asserting, as Lieutenant Colonel Michael Donnelly wrote in response to an inquiry from the *Washington Monthly*, that "the tactics used in this attack are consistent with al-Qaeda."

This scenario has become common. After a strike, the military rushes to point the finger at al-Qaeda, even when the actual evidence remains hazy and an alternative explanation—raw hatred between local Sunnis and Shiites—might fit the circumstances just as well. The press blasts such dubious conclusions back to American citizens and policy makers in Washington, and the incidents get tallied and quantified in official reports, cited by the military in briefings in Baghdad. The White House then takes the reports and crafts sound bites depicting AQI as the number one threat to peace and stability in Iraq. (In July, for instance, at Charleston Air Force Base, the president gave a speech about Iraq that mentioned al-Qaeda ninety-five times.)

By now, many in Washington have learned to discount the president's rhetorical excesses when it comes to the war. But even some of his harshest critics take at face value the estimates provided by the military about AQI's presence. Politicians of both parties point to such figures when forming their positions on the war. All of the top three Democratic presidential candidates have argued for keeping some American forces in Iraq or the region, citing among other reasons the continued threat from al-Qaeda.

But what if official military estimates about the size and impact of al-Qaeda in Iraq are simply wrong? Indeed, interviews with numerous military and intelligence analysts, both inside and outside of government, suggest that the number of strikes the group has directed represent only a fraction of what official estimates claim. Further, al-Qaeda's presumed role in leading the violence through uniquely devastating attacks that catalyze further unrest may also be overstated.

Having been led astray by flawed prewar intelligence about WMDs, official Washington wants to believe it takes a more skeptical view of the administration's information now. Yet Beltway insiders seem to be making almost precisely the same mistakes in sizing up al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Despite President Bush's near-singular focus on al-Qaeda in Iraq, most in Washington understand that instability on the ground stems from multiple sources. Numerous attacks on both U.S. troops and Iraqi civilians have been the handiwork of Shiite militants, often connect-

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WATCH FOR THIS MAN

INCORRUPTIBLE, WISE, SIMPLE OF SPEECH

❖ He will advocate sharing the world's food and resources more equitably among nations...

Every year millions of people die needlessly from starvation, disease, and war. Millions more struggle to survive on less than $1 a day. As long as this injustice persists, we will never know peace.

❖ He will call for massive emergency relief...

An immediate program to provide basic necessities for the poorest areas of the world—perhaps in the form of a global Marshall Plan—will be the first of many changes needed.

❖ He will turn our attention to the environment...

Pollution is the #1 killer in the world today, and new reports say the consequences of global warming will come sooner and be more catastrophic than expected if we fail to act in time.

❖ With his help we will see that all life is one...

Acting as one human family, we will rebuild our world along more just and compassionate lines, and thus create the only basis for lasting peace.

❖ His public work will soon begin...

As millions worldwide take up his call for peace through sharing, he will acknowledge his role as World Teacher, the one awaited under different names by people of all religions and by those who simply wish for a better life for all—a Teacher for all humanity.

WHO IS THIS MAN?

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Hard Knocks: U.S. soldiers enter the home of suspected Iraqi insurgents.

AFP / Getty Images

ed to, or even part of, the Iraqi government. Opportunistic criminal gangs engage in some of the same heinous tactics.

The Sunni resistance is also comprised of multiple groups. The first consists of so-called "former regime elements." These include thousands of ex-officers from Saddam's old intelligence agency, the Mukabarat, and from the elite paramilitary unit Saddam Fedayeen. Their primary goal is to drive out the U.S. occupation and install a Sunni-led government hostile to Iranian influence. Some within this broad group support reconciliation with the current government or negotiations with the United States, under the condition that American forces set a timetable for a troop withdrawal.

The second category consists of homegrown Iraqi Sunni religious groups, such as the Mujahadeen Army of Iraq. These are native Iraqis who aim to install a religious-based government in Baghdad, similar to the regime in Tehran. These groups use religious rhetoric and terrorist tactics but are essentially nationalistic in their aims.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq comprises the third group. The terrorist network was founded in 2003 by the now-dead Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. (The extent of the group's organizational ties to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda is hotly debated, but the organizations share a worldview and set of objectives.) AQI is believed to have the most non-Iraqis in its ranks, particularly among its leadership. However, most recent assessments say the rank and file are mostly radicalized Iraqis. AQI, which calls itself the "Islamic State of Iraq," espouses the most radical form of Islam and calls for the imposition of strict *sharia*, or Islamic law. The group has no plans for a future Iraqi government and instead hopes to create a new Islamic caliphate with borders reaching far beyond Mesopotamia.

The essential questions are: How large is the presence of AQI, in terms of manpower and attacks instigated, and what role does the group play in catalyzing further violence? For the first question, the military has produced an estimate. In a background briefing this July in Baghdad, military officials said that during the first half of this year AQI accounted for 15 percent of attacks in Iraq. That figure was also cited in the military intelligence report during final preparations for a National Intelligence Estimate in July.

This is the number on which many military experts inside the Beltway rely. Michael O'Hanlon, a senior fellow in foreign policy studies at the Brookings Institution who attended the Baghdad background briefing, explained that he thought the estimate derived from a comprehensive analysis by teams of local intelligence agents who examine the type and location of daily attacks, and their intended targets, and crosscheck that with reports from Iraqi informants and other data, such as intercepted phone calls. "It's a fairly detailed kind of assessment," O'Hanlon said. "Obviously you can't always know who is behind an attack, but there is a fairly systematic way of looking at the attacks where they can begin to make a pretty informed guess."

Yet those who have worked on estimates inside the system take a more circumspect view. Alex Rossmiller, who worked in Iraq as an intelligence officer for the Department

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of Defense, says that real uncertainties exist in assigning responsibility for attacks. "It was kind of a running joke in our office," he recalls. "We would sarcastically refer to everybody as al-Qaeda."

To describe AQI's presence, intelligence experts cite a spectrum of estimates, ranging from 8 percent to 15 percent. The fact that such "a big window" exists, says Vincent Cannistraro, former chief of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center, indicates that "[those experts] really don't have a very good perception of what is going on."

It's notable that military intelligence reports have opted to cite a figure at the very top of that range. But even the low estimate of 8 percent may be an overstatement, if you consider some of the government's own statistics.

The first instructive set of data comes from the U.S.-sponsored Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. In March, the organization analyzed the online postings of eleven prominent Sunni insurgent groups, including AQI, tallying how many attacks each group claimed. AQI took credit for 10 percent of attacks on Iraqi security forces and Shiite militias (forty-three out of 439 attacks), and less than 4 percent of attacks on U.S. troops (seventeen out of 357). Although these Internet postings should not be taken as proof positive of the culprits, it's instructive to remember that PR-conscious al-Qaeda operatives are far more likely to overstate than understate their role.

When turning to the question of manpower, military officials told the *New York Times* in August that of the roughly 24,500 prisoners in U.S. detention facilities in Iraq (nearly all of whom are Sunni), just 1,800—about 7 percent—claim allegiance to al-Qaeda in Iraq. Moreover, the composition of inmates does not support the assumption that large numbers of foreign terrorists, long believed to be the leaders and most hard-core elements of AQI, are operating inside Iraq. In August, American forces held in custody 280 foreign nationals—slightly more than 1 percent of total inmates.

The State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), which arguably has the best track record for producing accurate intelligence assessments, last year estimated that AQI's membership was in a range of "more than 1,000." When compared with the military's estimate for the total size of the insurgency—between 20,000 and 30,000 full-time fighters—this figure puts AQI forces at around 5 percent. When compared with Iraqi intelligence's much larger estimates of the insurgency—200,000 fighters—INR's estimate would put AQI forces at less than 1 percent. This year, the State Department dropped even its base-level estimate, because, as an official explained, "the information is too disparate to come up with a consensus number."

How big, then, is AQI? The most persuasive estimate I've heard comes from Malcolm Nance, the author of *The Terrorists of Iraq* and a twenty-year intelligence veteran and Arabic speaker who has worked with military and intelligence units tracking al-Qaeda inside Iraq. He believes AQI includes about 850 full-time fighters, comprising 2 percent to 5 percent of the Sunni insurgency. "Al-Qaeda in Iraq," according to Nance, "is a microscopic terrorist organization."

So how did the military come up with an estimate of 15 percent, when government data and many of the intelligence community's own analysts point to estimates a fraction of that size? The problem begins at the top. When the White House singles out al-Qaeda in Iraq for special attention, the bureaucracy responds by creating procedures that hunt down more evidence of the organization. The more manpower assigned to focus on the group, the more evidence is uncovered that points to it lurking in every shadow. "When you have something that is really hot, the leaders start tasking everyone to look into that," explains W. Patrick Lang, a retired U.S. Army colonel and former head of Middle East intelligence analysis for the Department of Defense. "Whoever is at the top of the pyramid says, 'Make me a briefing showing what al-Qaeda in Iraq is doing,' and then the decision maker says, 'Aha, I knew I was right.'"

With disproportionate resources dedicated to tracking AQI, the search has become a self-reinforcing loop. The Army has a Special Operations task force solely dedicated to tracking al-Qaeda in Iraq. The Defense Intelligence Agency tracks AQI through its Iraq office and its counterterrorism office. The result is more information culled, more PowerPoint slides created, and, ultimately, more attention drawn to AQI, which amplifies its significance in the minds of military and intelligence officers. "Once people look at everything through that lens, al-Qaeda is all they see," said Larry Johnson, a former CIA officer who also worked at the U.S. State Department's Office of Counterterrorism. "It sort of becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Ground-level analysts in the field, facing pressures from superiors to document AQI's handiwork, might be able to question such assumptions if they had strong intelligence networks on the ground. Unfortunately, that's rarely the case. The intelligence community's efforts are hobbled by too few Arabic speakers in their ranks and too many unreliable informants in Iraqi communities, rendering a hazy picture that is open to interpretations.

Because uncertainty exists, the bar for labeling an attack the work of al-Qaeda can be very low. The fact that a detainee possesses al-Qaeda pamphlets or a laptop computer with cached jihadist Web sites, for example, is at times enough for analysts to link a detainee to al-Qaeda. "Sometimes it's as simple as an anonymous tip that al-Qaeda is active in a certain village, so they will go out on an operation and whoever they roll up, we call them al-Qaeda," says Alex Rossmiller. "People can get labeled al-Qaeda anywhere along in the chain of events, and it's really hard to unlabel them." Even when the military backs off explicit statements that AQI is responsible, as with the Tal Afar truck bombings, the perception that an attack is the work of al-Qaeda is rarely corrected.

The result can be baffling for the troops working on the ground, who hear the leadership characterizing the conflict

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in Iraq in ways that do not necessarily match what they see in the dusty and danger-laden villages. Michael Zacchea, a lieutenant colonel in the Marine Reserves who was deployed to Iraq, said he was sometimes skeptical of upper-level analysis emphasizing al-Qaeda in Iraq rather than the insurgency's local roots. "It's very, very frustrating for everyone involved who is trying to do the right thing," he said. "That's not how anyone learned to play the game when we were officers coming up the ranks, and we were taught to provide clear battlefield analysis."

Even if the manpower and number of attacks attributed to AQI have been exaggerated—and they have—many observers maintain that what is uniquely dangerous about the group is not its numbers, but the spectacular nature of its strikes. While homegrown Sunni and Shiite militias engage for the most part in tit-for-tat violence to forward sectarian ends, AQI's methods are presumed to be different—more dramatic, more inflammatory, and having a greater ripple effect on the country's fragile political environment. "The effect of al-Qaeda has been far beyond the numbers that they field," explains Thomas Donnelly, resident fellow for defense and national security at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington. "The question is, What attacks are likely to have the most destabilizing political and strategic affects?" He points, as do many inside the administration, to the February 2006 bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samara, a revered Shiite shrine, as a paramount example of AQI's outsize influence. President Bush has laid unqualified blame for the Samara bombing on al-Qaeda, and described the infamous incident—and ensuing sectarian violence—as a fatal tipping point toward the current unrest.

But is this view of AQI's vanguard role in destabilizing Iraq really true? There are three reasons to question that belief.

First, although spectacular attacks were a distinctive AQI hallmark early in the war, the group has since lost its monopoly on bloody fireworks. After five years of shifting alliances, cross-pollination of tactics, and copycat attacks, other insurgent groups now launch equally dramatic and politically charged attacks. For example, a second explosion at the Samara mosque in June 2007, which destroyed the shrine's minarets and sparked a wave of revenge attacks on Sunni mosques nationwide, may have been an inside job. U.S. military officials said fifteen uniformed men from the Shiite-run Iraqi Security Forces were arrested for suspected involvement in the attack.

Second, it remains unclear whether the original Samara bombing was itself the work of AQI. The group never took cred-

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Tit for Tat: A Sunni mosque near Basra is bombed in revenge for attacks on Iraqi Shia.

it for the attack, as it has many other high-profile incidents. The man who the military believe orchestrated the bombing, an Iraqi named Haitham al-Badri, was both a Samara native and a former high-ranking government official under Saddam Hussein. (His right-hand man, Hamed Jumaa Farid al-Saeedi, was also a former military intelligence officer in Saddam Hussein's army.) Key features of the bombing did not conform to the profile of an AQI attack. For example, the bombers did not target civilians, or even kill the Shiite Iraqi army soldiers guarding the mosque, both of which are trademark tactics of AQI. The planners also employed sophisticated explosive devices, suggesting formal military training common among former regime officers, rather than the more bluntly destructive tactics typical of AQI. Finally, Samara was the heart of Saddam's power base, where former regime fighters keep tight control over the insurgency. Frank "Greg" Ford, a retired counterintelligence agent for the Army Reserves, who worked with the Army in Samara before the 2006 bombing, says that the evidence points away from AQI and toward a different conclusion: "The Baathists directed that attack," says Ford.

Third, while some analysts believe that AQI drafts Baathist insurgents to carry out its attacks, other intelligence experts think it is the other way around. In other words, they see evidence of native insurgent forces coopting the steady stream of delusional extremists seeking martyrdom that AQI brings into Iraq. "Al-Qaeda can't operate anywhere in Iraq without kissing the ring of the former regime," says Nance. "They can't move car bombs full of explosives and foreign suicide bombers through a city without everyone knowing who they are. They need to be facilitated." Thus new foreign fighters "come through and some local Iraqis will say, 'Okay, why don't you go down to the Ministry of Defense building downtown.'" AQI recruits often find themselves taking orders from a network of former regime insurgents, who assemble their car bombs and tell them what to blow up. They become, as Nance says, "puppets for the other insurgent groups."

The view that AQI is neither as big nor as lethal as commonly believed is widespread among working-level analysts and troops on the ground. A majority of those interviewed for this article believe that the military's AQI estimates are overblown to varying degrees. If such misgivings are common, why haven't doubts pricked the public debate? The reason is that alternate views are running up against an echo chamber of powerful players all with an interest in hyping AQI's role.

The first group that profits from an outsize focus on AQI are former regime elements, and the tribal chiefs with whom

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they are often allied. These forces are able to carry out attacks against Shiites and Americans, but also to shift the blame if it suits their purposes. While the U.S. military has recently touted "news" that Sunni insurgents have turned against the al-Qaeda terrorists in Anbar Province, there is little evidence of actual clashes between these two groups. Sunni insurgents in Anbar have largely ceased attacks on Americans, but some observers suggest that this development has less to do with vanquishing AQI than with the fact that U.S. troops now routinely deliver cash-filled duffle bags to tribal sheiks serving as "lead contractors" on "reconstruction projects." The excuse of fighting AQI comes in handy. "Remember, Iraq is an honor society," explains Juan Cole, an Iraq expert and professor of modern Middle Eastern studies at the University of Michigan. "But if you say it wasn't us—it was al-Qaeda—then you don't lose face."

The second benefactor is the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, often the first to blame specific attacks on AQI. Talking about "al-Qaeda" offers the government a politically correct way of talking about Sunni violence without seeming to blame the Sunnis themselves, to whom they are ostensibly trying to reach out in a unity government. On a deeper level, however, the al-Maliki regime has very limited popular support, and the government officials and ruling Islamic Dawa Party feel an imperative to include Iraqi troubles in the broader "global war in terrorism" in order to keep U.S. troops in the country. In June, when faced with increasingly uncomfortable pressure from the Americans for his failure to resolve key political issues, al-Maliki warned that Iraqi intelligence had found evidence of a "widespread and dangerous plan by the terrorist al-Qaeda organization" to mount attacks outside of Iraq.

Elsewhere within the Shiite bloc of Iraqi politics, Moqtada al-Sadr has his own reasons for playing up the idea of AQI. "The Sadrists want to overstate the role of al-Qaeda in a way to emphasize on the 'foreignness' of the current problem in Iraq; and this easily fits their anti-occupation ideology, which seems to gain more popularity among Shia Iraqis on a daily basis," said Babak Rahimi, a professor of Islamic Studies and expert in Shiite politics at the University of California at San Diego.

Bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, remain eager to take credit for the violence in Iraq, despite the bad blood that existed between bin Laden and AQI's slain founder, al-Zarqawi. They've produced a long series of taped statements in recent years taunting U.S. leaders and attempting to conflate their operations with the Sunni resistance in Iraq. "They want to bring this all together as a motivating tool to encourage recruitment," said Farhana Ali, a terrorism expert at the RAND Corporation.

The press has also been complicit in inflating the threat of AQI. Because of the danger on the ground, reporters struggle to do the kind of comprehensive field reporting that's necessary to check facts and question statements from military spokespersons and Iraqi politicians. Today, for example, U.S. reporters rarely travel independently outside central Baghdad. Few, if any, insurgents have ever given interviews to Western reporters. These limitations are understandable, if unfortunate. But news organizations are reluctant to admit their confines in obtaining information. Ambiguities are glossed over; allegations are presented as facts. Besides, it's undeniably in the reporter's own interest to keep "al-Qaeda attacks" in the headline, because it may move their story from A16 to A1.

Finally, no one has more incentive to overstate the threat of AQI than President Bush and those in the administration who argue for keeping a substantial military presence in Iraq. Insistent talk about AQI aims to place the Iraq War in the context of the broader war on terrorism. Pointing to al-Qaeda in Iraq helps the administration leverage Americans' fears about terrorism and residual anger over the attacks of September 11. It is perhaps one of the last rhetorical crutches the president has left to lean on.

This is not to say that al-Qaeda in Iraq doesn't pose a real danger, both to stability in Iraq and to security in the United States. Today multiple Iraqi insurgent groups target U.S. forces, with the aim of driving out the occupation. But once our troops withdraw, most Sunni resistance fighters will have no impetus to launch strikes on American soil. In that regard, al-Qaeda—and AQI, to the extent it is affiliated with bin Laden's network—is unique. The group's leadership consists largely of foreign fighters, and its ideology and ambitions are global. Al-Qaeda fighters trained in Baghdad may one day use those skills to plot strikes aimed at Boston.

Yet it's not clear that the best way to counter this threat is with military action in Iraq. AQI's presence is tolerated by the country's Sunni Arabs, historically among the most secular in the Middle East, because they have a common enemy in the United States. Absent this shared cause, it's not clear that native insurgents would still welcome AQI forces working to impose strict *sharia*. In Baghdad, any near-term functioning government will likely be an alliance of Shiites and Kurds, two groups unlikely to accept organized radical Sunni Arab militants within their borders. Yet while precisely predicting future political dynamics in Iraq is uncertain, one thing is clear now: the continued American occupation of Iraq is al-Qaeda's best recruitment tool, the lure to hook new recruits. As RAND's Ali said, "What inspires jihadis today is Iraq."

Five years ago, the American public was asked to support the invasion of Iraq based on the false claim that Saddam Hussein was somehow linked to al-Qaeda. Today, the erroneous belief that al-Qaeda's franchise in Iraq is a driving force behind the chaos in that country may be setting us up for a similar mistake. WM

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What's the Big Idea?

Democrats are scrambling for a new paradigm. Maybe they don't need one.

By Kevin Drum

THE ARGUMENT
BILLIONAIRES, BLOGGERS, AND THE BATTLE TO REMAKE DEMOCRATIC POLITICS
MATT BAI

The Argument: Billionaires, Bloggers, and the Battle to Remake Democratic Politics
by Matt Bai
Penguin Press HC, 336 pp.

One of the most annoying conventions of serious book reviewing is the apparently widespread belief that it's unsophisticated to come right out and say what you think of a book. So let's get that out of the way right now: I had more fun reading *The Argument* than I've had reading any political book in ages. It was fun the way *The Boys on the Bus* was fun. The way *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* was fun. (Am I dating myself here?) Or maybe even the way *Primary Colors* was fun.

Which is not to say that the book is entirely fair or entirely right. But it sure is a romp if you enjoy inside baseball. *Really* inside baseball.

Fair warning, though: *The Argument* is not really about an argument at all. In fact, it's more about the lack of an argument. It's about the angst and dejection of Democratic politicians and activists who woke up after the 2004 election and discovered that their party *still* didn't have what it needed to win elections. At various times the book's author, Matt Bai, calls this lack a "philosophical framework," a "compelling case," or a "new paradigm," but basically it all boils down to one thing: a big new idea—something that will define the Democratic Party in the information age and earn the loyalty—and votes—of a new generation of voters who take the past triumphs of the party for granted.

Bai takes a look at this search for a big new idea through three lenses. The first is the Democracy Alliance, a secretive group of billionaires trying to fund their way to an answer. The second is MoveOn, a grassroots organization that was founded in 1998 and then took off after 9/11. The third is the blogosphere. All three groups have spent the past few years, each in its own way, groping toward ... something.

But what? If you're willing to deal in very broad brushstrokes, the three big liberal waves of the twentieth century were powered by three different big ideas. The progressive era was mostly about labor rights and good government. The New Deal was about building a social safety net. The 1960s were powered by the rights revolution. All of these big ideas are still salient in the twenty-first century—Andy Stern, president of the 1.8-million-member Service Employees International Union, is busily trying to unionize the service sector, Michael Moore is trying to convince the country to adopt national health care, and gay marriage is right up there with abortion on the cultural hot-button scale—but they aren't *new*. What's worse, they're about battles that have mostly been won. Not completely won, but won enough that they can't command the kind of mass activism that liberals need if they want to seriously overhaul the political landscape and relegate the Republican Party to the ash heap.

So what's next? Bai starts his story with Rob Stein and his famous PowerPoint presentation. Stein, a liberal thinker who's worked both in and out of government since the late '70s, decided in 2002 to finally give form to a longtime obsession of his: the story of how

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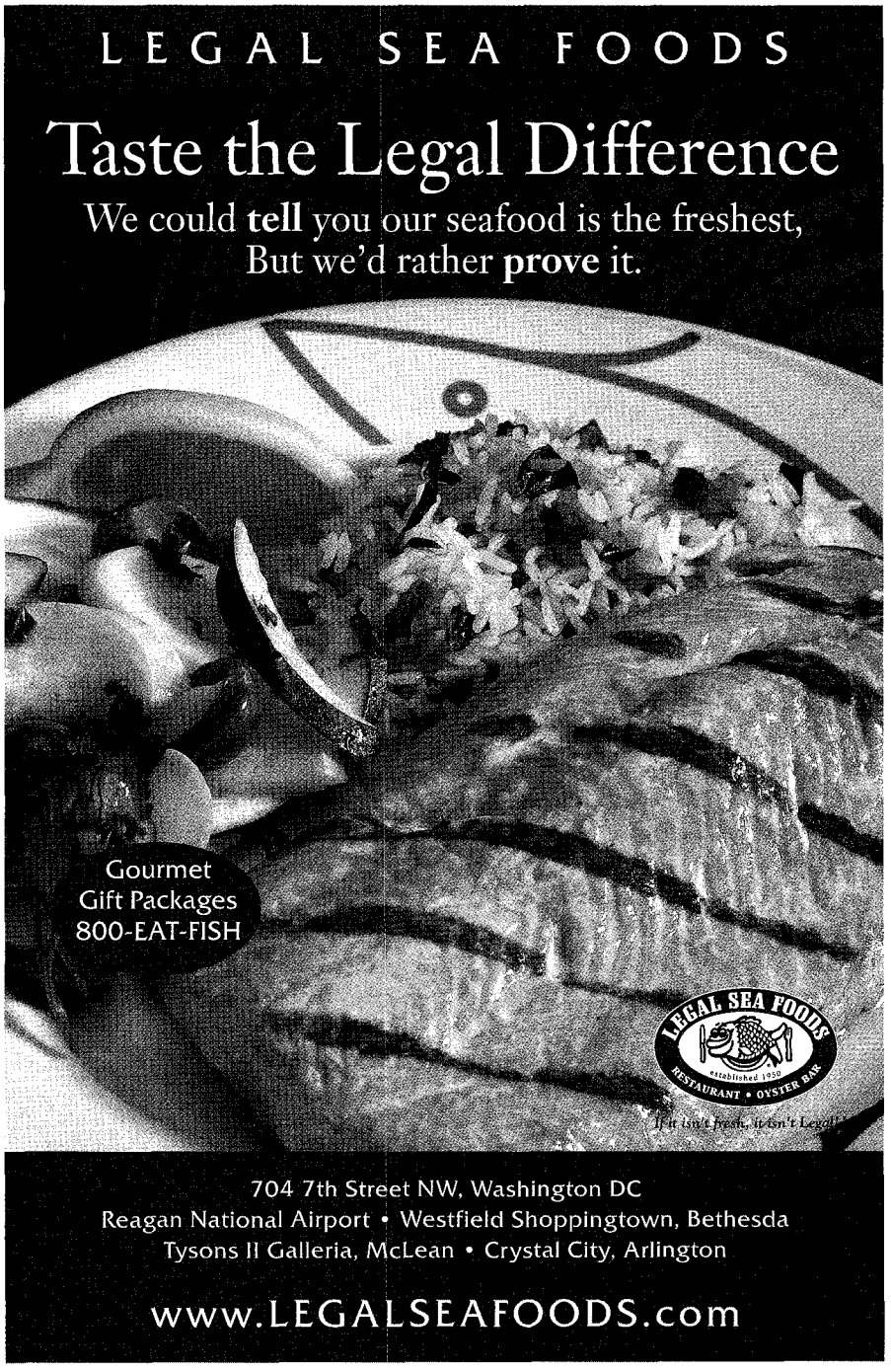
the Republican Party went from friendless pariah in the '60s to 800-pound gorilla in the '80s and '90s. His answer, which he has since presented to hundreds of Democratic Party insiders, is a finely honed narrative of what Stein calls the "conservative message machine," a project originally kickstarted by a diverse collection of hard-core millionaire activists who, after the counterculture revolution of the '60s, began funding a think tank infrastructure dedicated to rebuilding the conservative movement. The resulting organizations—the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the Federalist Society, and others—did just that.

Stein's dream was to emulate this machine, and right away you can see where this might be a problem. After all, movement conservatism, despite its frequent and tiresome pretensions, has never really produced any big ideas. What it *has* produced is an intellectual superstructure designed to provide fresh justification for all its old ideas. Supply-side economics was a new excuse for cutting taxes. Constitutional originalism was an excuse for cutting down the regulatory state. Neoconservatism was an excuse for old-fashioned hawkery. Evangelical Christians provided ammunition for cultural traditionalism. These were all dusty ideas, but the think tanks and interest groups made them look shiny and new.

Unfortunately, America's liberal millionaires didn't seem to get this. The eventual result of Stein's proselytization was the formation of the Democracy Alliance, a group of megarich liberal donors who were convinced that a combination of money and business acumen could come up not just with new words and phrases, but with genuinely big new ideas. After all, if Peter Lewis and George Soros could bust new paradigms in the business world, why not in the political world too?

Bai's inside story of the Democracy Alliance is, depending on your temperament, either hilarious or disheartening. I found it to be a bit of both. The millionaires, unsurprisingly, all had egos to match their pocketbooks and little patience with lesser minds ("lesser" defined as anyone so doltish that they were unable to make at least a hundred mil or so playing around in the financial markets). And unlike the conservative tycoons they were copying, they insisted on a stifling, top-down management style. They hired staff and then refused to listen to them. They made up absurd rules for anyone who wanted a piece of their funding. They tried to come up with new ideas and ended up with banalities.

Bai is scathing in his description of the Democracy Alliance's millionaires, who spent most of their time involved in internal backbiting and then ended up funding all the same old organizations that liberals have always funded. Their political naïveté was equally breathtaking, best conveyed by an almost painfully embarrassing story Bai tells about one of the alliance's founders, who got played like a country fiddle in his first encounter with Terry McAuliffe and Bill Clinton in the late '90s and, years later, still didn't realize what had happened. "[Clinton] was really listening," the millionaire said about an obviously staged conversation. "You can't fake that." But of course you can, and Bill Clinton, as Bai notes, could pull this off in his sleep.



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But if Bai's scorn for the millionaires is both palpable and richly deserved (and funny!), his attitude toward his other subjects is more ambivalent. MoveOn, for example, was until recently a purely virtual organization, basically a gigantic e-mail list dedicated to raising money for candidates and causes. But what was the cause? Bai says it was, at bottom, always the same: "Republicans were evil, arrogant, and corrupt, and they had to be banished back to the wormy little holes they had crawled out of, the sooner the better. This was the only real message object its members cared about."

Pitch your ears in one direction, and this description is both playful and probably accurate. Pitch them in a different direction, however, and you can hear the overtones of world-weary condescension poking through. The same is true for his description of a MoveOn house party, which shows a terrific ear for detail and some obvious sympathy for the difficulty ordinary people have when they try to go beyond mere loathing of the Republican Party and instead work to actively produce a new political vision. But it's also obvious that he thinks of this gathering as a bit naive and ditzy, sort of a group therapy session for people who are working their way through some anger issues and don't really understand their own minds.

As it turns out, though, both attitudes seem partly justified. After all, Bai's house party was one of hundreds going on at the same time, and once the results from all the parties were tallied up the final vision ended up being an all-too-predictable liberal laundry list: health care for all, energy independence, and "democracy restored." As Bai notes dryly, "these weren't entirely novel ideas." And so they weren't. MoveOn's house parties hadn't produced a paradigm shift any more than the millionaires' club had. Still, he admits, their ideas were probably more substantial than anything the gray-suited politicos in Washington were coming up with. So that was something, at least.

The third leg of *The Argument*, the blogosphere, is another animal entirely, and one that Bai only partly gets. He focuses nearly all of his attention on one site, Daily Kos; two bloggers, Markos Moulitsas and Jerome Armstrong; and the constellation of netroots activists who surround them. And he obviously understands what they're after: they want the Democratic Party to get a spine. They want candidates who will fight back against the conservative message machine, who won't shrink from confrontation with the Republican Party, and who are proud to be progressives. In short, to echo the words of Paul Wellstone and Howard Dean, they hail from the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party, and they want that wing to crush the Blue Dogs, DLC centrists, and assorted other moderate sellouts who they believe are currently running the liberal establishment.

Bai obviously has some affection for this bulldog attitude, which tends to sweep away as irrelevant anything that happened before 1998, but he also correctly notes that this focus on partisanship *über alles* frequently results in ideological incoherence. One minute Moulitsas is railing against the Democratic Leadership Council for being a sellout to the liberal cause and the next he's casually describing himself as a libertarian. Armstrong ends up consulting for former Virginia Governor Mark Warner, as centrist a DLC moderate as you'll ever find. If there's a big new idea here, it's hard to figure out what it is.

But that may be because Bai was looking in the wrong place. Liberal political bloggers generally view the blogosphere as split into two halves: the netroots activists on one side and the "wonkosphere" on the other. They aren't separate groups so much as two halves of a single brain. Both sides want to win, and both sides want to push the Democratic Party moderately to the left, but it's the wonkosphere that likes to gab about policy big think. If the blogosphere is ever likely to produce a big new idea in an ideological sense, this is where it's going to come from.

But you'd never know that, because Bai doesn't waste any time with the wonkosphere, an omission that's unfortunate. It's not that the wonks have necessarily gotten a firm handle on the future any better than the millionaires or the house parties, but at least they're talking about it. I usually think of the wonkosphere's discussions as "policy lite," but even at that they're frequently more penetrating and more honest than the 300-page white papers from the think tanks. And they make policy interesting and digestible to a huge number of people who wouldn't otherwise hear anything about it at all.

In the end, Bai fails in his search for the Holy Grail. He never finds his big new idea. He contends that this betrays a hollowness at the core of modern liberalism, but as entertaining as *The Argument* is—and it's very entertaining—that may be a flaw in the book more than a flaw in the Democratic Party. As bloggers will endlessly (and correctly) tell you, liberals have loads of good ideas—certainly far more than the tired carcass of conservatism bequeathed to the country by George Bush—and if none of them truly qualifies as a New Deal–esque paradigm shift, that may be because there just isn't one to be had right now.

Liberals have loads of good ideas—certainly far more than the tired carcass of conservatism bequeathed to the country by George Bush.

It's easy—maybe too easy—to toss around glib references to the "information age" and the "postindustrial state," but the fact that people put these phrases into book titles doesn't automatically make politics-as-we-know-it obsolete. Sometimes, after all, you live in an era that demands progress but not a root-and-branch transformation, and that may just be the era we live in. Bai quotes an awful lot of smart politicians and liberal thinkers repeating the mantra that Democrats need a big new idea, but it's telling that not a single one of these smart people ever actually suggests one that's compelling. Maybe that should tell us something. WM

Kevin Drum, contributing writer for the *Washington Monthly,* edits Political Animal, at www.washingtonmonthly.com.

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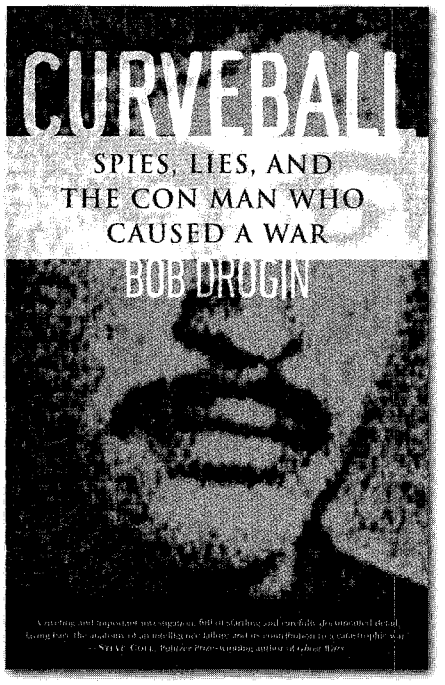
When WMD Meets *Office Space*

How petty bureaucratic jealousies in the intelligence world led to the invasion of Iraq.

By Spencer Ackerman



Curveball: Spies, Lies, and the Con Man Who Caused a War
by Bob Drogin
Random House, 319 pp.

A word of advice to reporters seeking to embed in Iraq: it helps to avoid the whole WMD thing. In March, I met an Army officer for dinner at the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. In the course of a general discussion about whether the war's fortunes were as bad as they seemed, the conversation turned to Saddam Hussein's nonexistent chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. The whole reason the two of us were in Iraq in the first place, I mused, was the Bush administration's deception, and self-deception, over WMDs, as surreal as that long-ago justification seems in retrospect.

My dinner companion took my reminder of the years-old debacle as something of an affront. His compatriots didn't care about WMD, he said: whatever the reason they were sent to Iraq, the fact remains that they're there now. Remarking upon the long-disproven rationale for the war seemed to the officer to be an unfair distraction from the military's current efforts.

That night, over dinner, we were truly talking past one another. But on reflection, my friend's annoyance is completely understandable: no one serving in Iraq has the luxury of ruminating on past history. WMDs matter little when you're driving nervously down a road full of IEDs. And this is one more transgression wrought by the war: that salvaging what can be salvaged in Iraq requires ignoring the very reasons we invaded in the first place.

Enter Bob Drogin's new book, *Curveball: Spies, Lies, and the Con Man Who Caused a War*, an insightful and compelling account of one crucial component of the war's origins. Drogin, a national security correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*, meticulously recreates the story of a twenty-something Iraqi (codenamed "Curveball") who leveraged a desire for plush asylum in Germany into an inconsistent, fantastical account of biowarfare machines hidden on trucks. This nonsense claimed by Curveball traversed tensions between partner intelligence agencies and internecine battles within the CIA to provide a pretext for the invasion. Had Drogin merely pieced together Curveball's story, it alone would have made for a thrilling book. But he provides something more: a frightening glimpse at how easily we could make the same mistakes again.

Ahmed Hassan Mohammed was the false name on the passport Curveball used to fly to Munich in 1999 and apply for asylum. (Curveball still lives in Germany, under official protection; his real identity is a German state secret.) At the time, he was anything but political. Curveball, a chain-smoking manic depressive, wanted the perquisites befitting his talents as a chemical engineer—including "a gleaming Mercedes

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sedan with buttery soft leather seats," as Drogin tantalizingly envisions—and figured that the Germans, with their passion for engineering, would be the ones to provide them to him.

His key to getting asylum was to tell a compelling, if untrue, story of weapons programs in Iraq. The German intelligence service—the *Bundesnachrichtendienst*, or BND—bought Mohammed's story, and kept buying it, even after the tale began to fray. Much of the German willingness to believe Curveball had to do with an unlikely contributor to the Iraq War's origins: the institutional history between the BND and the CIA. Throughout the cold war and into the 1990s, the partner agencies developed a thorough distaste for each other. The BND was notorious for being infiltrated by the East Germans and the Soviets, and its reputation for incompetence led the CIA to amplify the condescension it often displays to its partner services. The Germans, unsurprisingly, resented this. Now, in 1999, with Curveball in hand, the BND had something the U.S. desired—a defector claiming firsthand knowledge of a concealed Iraqi bioweapons program—and the BND was eager to repay the CIA for more than forty years of slights. Therefore, when senior BND officials decided to pass on to the Americans what they knew about Curveball, they bypassed the CIA, and instead formed a liaison with the Defense Intelligence Agency, a sister intelligence service with which the CIA frequently clashed.

Even though the CIA had been shut out of the game, Curveball's handler, a BND agent known as Schumann, steadfastly refused DIA or any other American access to his prize defector, acting out of pure professional parochialism. He concocted a nonsensical story that Curveball hated the United States and wouldn't consent to an interview with an American, and the DIA, clueless about the BND's poor reputation, accepted that their only access to Curveball would be through the Germans. Curveball had confirmed what the U.S. and partner agencies suspected: that Iraq had retained its bioweapons program in spite of UN sanctions. (This ran contrary to the testimony of the defector Hussein Kamil, Saddam Hussein's son-in-law, who claimed that Iraq's WMD efforts were defunct by 1995.) Curveball added to his story the revelation that the program now relied on crafting bioagents inside trucks that were then driven into concealed facilities to store the toxins—a simple explanation for how inspectors could have missed what everyone had assumed was an ongoing program.

In 2001, Schumann and his colleagues started to discover discrepancies in Curveball's story. Early on, for instance, Curveball claimed to have worked only at Baghdad's Chemical Engineering and Design Center on the bioweapons project; in later interrogations, he claimed to have been assigned to Djerf al Nadaf, a different facility southeast of Baghdad. In addition, much of what he told interrogators about WMD logistics made little sense, and interrogators found it hard to distinguish between what he claimed to have seen himself and what he had overheard. Making matters worse, Curveball was starting to despair over his inability to land a high-status engineering job and growing increasingly irritable when his interviewers asked him to reconcile the emerging problems in his story. Schumann's colleagues finally told superiors that Curveball was "emotionally unbalanced" and "psychologically unstable." With the exception of one CIA doctor who performed a physical on Curveball at BND request (and who noted only that he was hungover), the Germans refused to allow the U.S. access to Curveball—but in mid-2001, they asked the U.S., the U.K., and Israel for help in corroborating his information.

What should have happened next was the opposite of what did. The CIA's little-esteemed weapons-analysis directorate, known as WINPAC, had tantalizing hints about Curveball from the DIA. But the DIA liaison to Curveball never filed reports assessing the Iraqi's credibility. The Germans looked "desperate," according to a senior BND official, for any scraps of intelligence that could support Curveball's statements. Yet the CIA considered the best source to potentially corroborate Curveball's account—a defector provided by Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress—to be a fabricator. None of this, unfortunately, diminished WINPAC's enthusiasm for Curveball.

It was a series of compounding errors, and office politics were again the primary culprit. WINPAC was sick of its reputation as a backwater organization, and this grievance apparently colored the perspective of two of its key analysts, known as Beth and Jerry, who became "true believers" in Curveball. Curveball's account was just what WINPAC needed—evidence that Saddam had an ongoing and deadly bioweapons program—particularly after it became clear to the CIA that the Bush administration was gearing up to attack Iraq. Before 9/11, WINPAC's assessments on Iraq's weapons were larded with caveats. After 9/11 and the anthrax attacks, writes Drogin, "all such caution, all such doubt, disappeared." WINPAC analysts pushed Curveball's allegations through the CIA to its craven director, George Tenet, and from there to the White House and Capitol Hill in advance of the October 2002 vote for the invasion.

As long as rival bureaus care more about proving a point than about accessing the truth, it's only a matter of time before another Curveball poisons the intelligence well.

The only bulwark against the layers of willful delusion was the CIA's Europe chief, a longtime operative named Tyler Drumheller. Having learned that the BND secretly suspected that Curveball was lying, Drumheller tried to put on the brakes at Langley. But it was futile. Tenet's senior staff was trying to marshal evidence in support of the forthcoming invasion, and WINPAC took Drumheller's warnings as an affront to its pro-

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fessionalism. When Drumheller all but begged Tenet to excise Curveball's material from the address Colin Powell was preparing for the United Nations, Tenet replied, "Yeah, yeah, yeah."

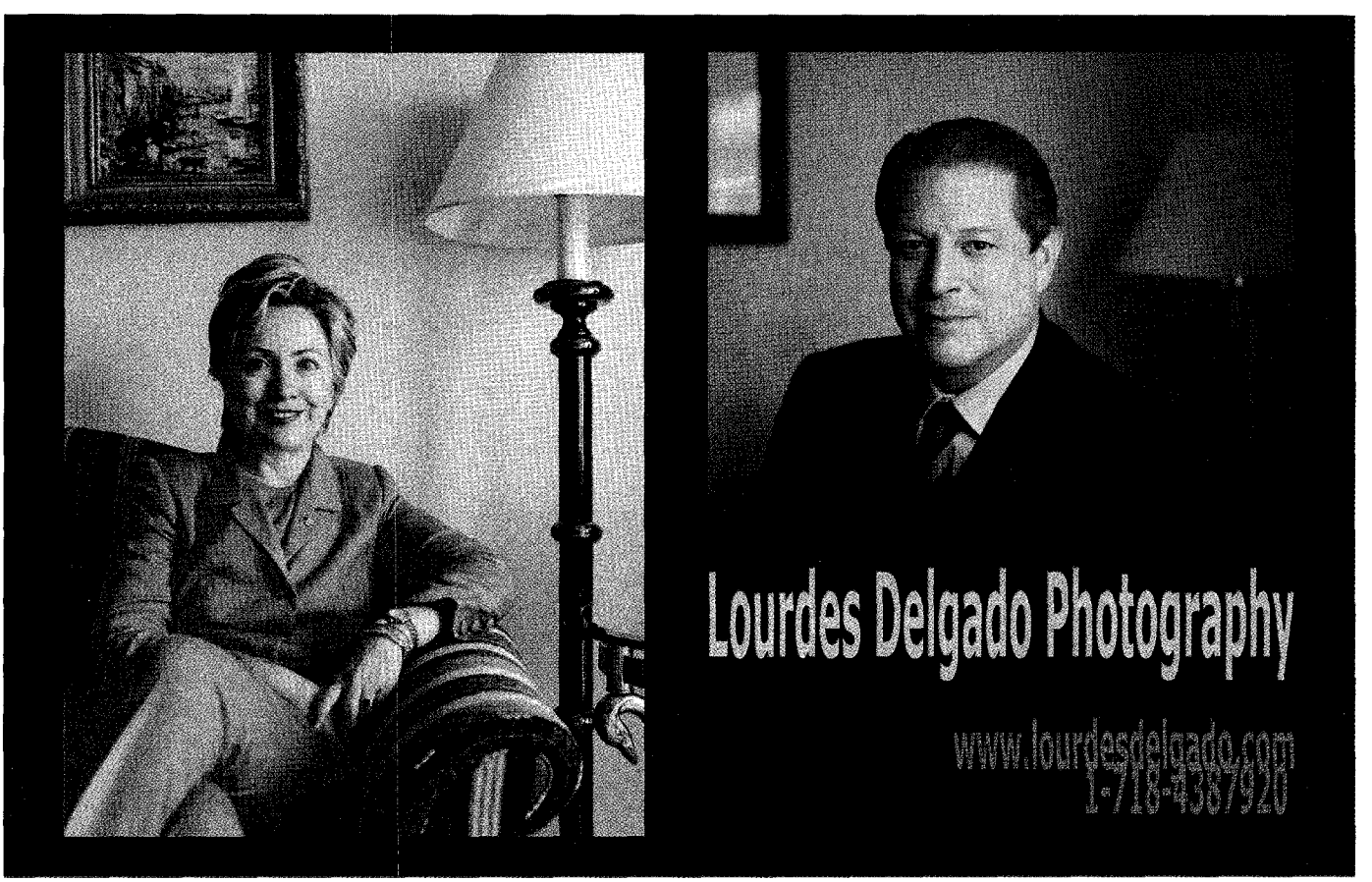
All of this fraudulence would soon be exposed in Baghdad, and massive recrimination followed. The BND claimed to have resented the CIA's use of Curveball in Powell's speech, insisting to Drumheller that the agency had never vouched for the Iraqi's story—something true on its face and false in its substance. DIA officials contended that it was never their job to vet Curveball, only to pass along the German reports to U.S. intelligence. Jerry ultimately went to Baghdad to join David Kay's CIA-led weapons hunt and refused to believe that Curveball was wrong. When the conclusion became unavoidable, Jerry, desperate to atone for his mistake, crusaded to get the CIA to formally rescind its endorsement of Curveball—something it finally did in late 2004—and was hounded out of Langley for embarrassing the agency. (Curveball, it was learned in 2003, had been fired from the Chemical Engineering and Design Center in 1995 "for unspecified sexual offenses," which meant he could not have witnessed most of what he claimed to.) Drumheller's reward was a caustic and foolish attack on his integrity in George Tenet's recent memoir.

The disgraceful episode has had two lasting impacts. The first, of course, is the Iraq War. The second is the reconfiguration of the intelligence community that Congress and President Bush mandated after the 9/11 and WMD intelligence failures. That fix, which centralized control of the community under an agency-independent intel czar, was intended to prevent Curveball-like episodes from ever happening again.

Alas, it probably won't help. The real value of Drogin's book is its meticulous demonstration that bureaucratic imperative often leads to self-delusion. The BND wanted to prove its value to the CIA; WINPAC wanted to do the same. Analysts viewing Drumheller's warnings sniffed that a case officer couldn't possibly see the bigger picture—in which the only rational conclusion was that Curveball was legit. Drumheller's bosses were only interested in giving the Bush administration its war and shielding the CIA if something went wrong.

The bureaucratic boxes can be shuffled endlessly. But intramural competition in international intelligence partnerships is an enduring fact. As long as rival bureaus care more about proving a point than about accessing the truth, it's only a matter of time before another Curveball poisons the intelligence well. With the next crisis set to flare over, say, Iran, or Pakistan's Waziristan Province, the surest possible safeguard against another such situation is to understand how Curveball managed to play into the worst impulses among intelligence professionals. If we don't learn that lesson, my officer friend had better pack his bags now for the next expedition. WM

Spencer Ackerman, a national security correspondent for the *Washington Monthly,* is a reporter-blogger for Talking Points Memo.com.



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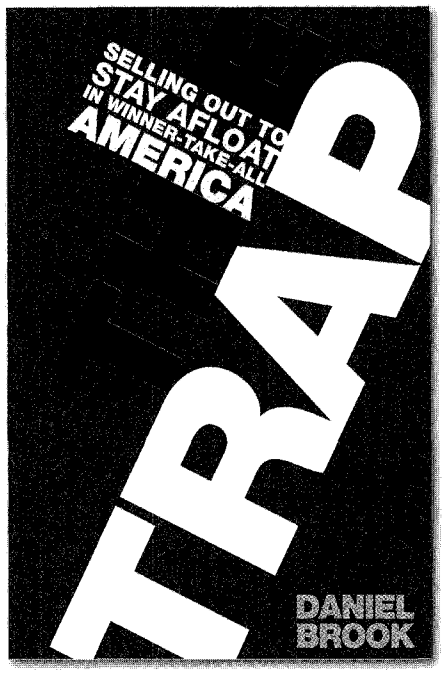
Low-Paid, Liberal, Nonprofit Yuppies Unite

YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT YOUR CHAINS.

By Doron Taussig



The Trap: Selling Out to Stay Afloat in Winner-Take-All America

by Daniel Brook
Times Books, 274 pp.

When Daniel Brook and I first spoke about his book, the conversation morphed quickly into what I imagine a therapy session to be. He even compared me to my parents. We were sitting in a bar in Philadelphia, and Brook was delivering what by then must have been a very practiced spiel. His book, he said, was about young, educated people who want to go into either public service, advocacy, or creative work, but increasingly find that they can't stay in those fields and maintain a basic, middle-class lifestyle.

It just so happened that I had asked to see Brook, and bought him a beer, precisely because I was a young, educated person beginning to find that I couldn't stay in my field and maintain a basic, middle-class lifestyle. Brook used to write for the same alt-weekly paper I write for now, and though our tenures didn't overlap and I hardly knew him, I knew he was making a go of it as a journalist in Philadelphia, without selling stories on, say, perfect abs to *Cosmo*. This was no small accomplishment, and I'd been hoping to learn his secret. Instead, I began talking about myself.

"That sounds like me," I said.

Brook nodded knowingly, and asked about my background. I told him that my parents both work for the government—my father's an attorney for the City of New York, my mother's a public school teacher. They raised me in Queens Village, Queens.

"And could you buy their house from them?" he asked.

Of course, he already knew the answer. He was asking to make a point: I had been looking at things through the narrow lens of my ambition. Brook has been trying to get people like me to see a bigger picture.

If talking to Brook was like visiting a therapist, reading his book was like finding an entry in the DSM that sounds suspiciously familiar. *The Trap: Selling Out to Stay Afloat in Winner-Take-All America* opens with two case studies. One is the irony-soaked story of Pam Perd, a member of the tongue-in-cheek protest group Billionaires for Bush. "Pam" puts in long, unpaid hours coordinating public relations for her organization; to support the work, she holds a job handling PR for Fortune 500 companies—as Brook puts it, "mere millionaires for Bush." She'd prefer to work for a nonprofit, of course. But that kind of gig wouldn't pay for her current, relatively modest lifestyle of a fifth-floor walkup in the East Village and the hope of someday raising a family.

The other case is a twenty-seven-year-old activist named Claire, a former Fulbright scholar who makes $35,000 a year for her work at a nonprofit combating the global traffic

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of sex workers. Technically, this is a middle-class salary, but in New York (where Claire needs to be in order to lobby the United Nations), it's hardly enough. Factor in school debt, and Claire has to wait tables on weekends just to afford a shared apartment in Queens. Should she wish to have a family, the math would no longer work.

Pam and Claire may seem like people on widely divergent paths, but Brook sees them as two victims of the same pernicious circumstance. In today's hyper-capitalist America, he argues, the basic touchstones of a middle-class life—health insurance, a quality education for one's children, and home ownership, particularly within reasonable commuting distance of a metropolitan center—have become exorbitantly expensive. At the same time, the compensation gap between people dedicating their lives to the public good and those dedicating their lives to corporate enrichment has grown immensely. And so a generation of young, educated people who want to do good in the world is forced to choose between material sacrifice (Claire) and spiritual sacrifice, or "selling out" (Pam).

That people generally considered to be fortunate are actually screwed is an ambitious thesis, and a tempting one: Do I really get to blame my financial anxieties on socioeconomic trends, rather than life choices? To establish his premise, Brook corrals a herd of anecdotes about young people making unsavory decisions. There's the teacher who lives in a "low-income" housing development outside San Francisco. The D.C. couple that, because of the cost of living, is gradually transforming from two public service professionals into a 1950s-style household, he taking a corporate gig and she staying home to care for the children (Brook dubs this the "mutual martyrdom marriage"). The tech entrepreneur with a potentially fatal cardiac condition, and no health insurance. The terrifying—*terrifying*—world of law school graduates, where we meet a young prosecutor in his last day on a job he loves before defecting to a private law firm in order to pay off loans and raise a family. His advice for current law students: "Have no debt: marry money or be independently wealthy."

In perhaps my favorite section, "At the Wake," we watch as a gathering of graduate students at Yale (Brook's alma mater) sits through a recruiting session for McKinsey & Company. McKinsey is the management-consulting firm that advised Wal-Mart to cut health care costs by requiring all cashiers to gather shopping carts as part of their job (thus discouraging unhealthy people from applying). The students are finishing degrees in science or literature, and seem like a bad match for such an outfit. But it turns out that the McKinsey recruiters have academic credentials much like the students'. They just found, when they got out of school, that corporate America was their most financially tenable option. Michael Yoo, an MIT PhD, tells the Yalies that McKinsey's hours don't bother him, because he used to work long days in the lab. "That a graduate school project was something a person purposefully selected to devote a number of years to while McKinsey assignments were dictated by the random needs of the market was never addressed," Brook notes.

Interspersed with these stories is, naturally, a bevy of statistics. Most of these are meant to illustrate the financial squeeze Brook's subjects are feeling: for example, that 90 percent of the homes in Boston are too expensive for a teacher-headed household; or that the starting salary of a Chicago teacher is just slightly higher than a single year of tuition at the University of Chicago; or that half of all American bankruptcies are the product of health care bills; or that the gap between a starting salary at a public interest law firm and a top corporate firm is currently as much as $100,000 (Brook calls the disparity "hazard pay for the soul"). Fewer of the stats actually substantiate the claim that educated young people are being driven into private-sector careers (perhaps because, and this a complicating factor Brook doesn't deal with, people don't necessarily spend whole careers in a single industry anymore). But after the first couple of chapters, I no longer thought it a coincidence that when Class Notes come, updating me on the career progress of my fellow alumni, the recent grads seem to be teachers and organizers, while the folks a few years out are in corporate jobs.

Then again, the people in my Class Notes live in the most desirable, expensive cities in the country. And indeed, Brook's anecdotage is centered primarily in just three places: New York, Washington, and San Francisco. Couldn't Pam move to Cleveland? Brook is fairly up front about the fact that the phenomenon he's bemoaning is a metropolitan one, and offers up some good defenses for why it still matters: for one thing, major cities are industry centers, and afford people an opportunity to make an impact that other places don't—Claire can't move to Cleveland because she needs to be in New York to lobby the UN. For another, if only lobbyists can afford to live in D.C.—well, that's a problem. But as Brook goes along, he sometimes seems to slip into treating "the Trap" as a nationwide phenomenon, and America as a place where no one can afford to be a teacher and the middle class doesn't exist. This just doesn't reflect the reality of American life, and it doesn't help the left's cause to pretend it does.

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Still, Brook's central insight is a good one, and he lays it out in savvy fashion. None of the book's subjects comes in for a close-up, or even returns much after his initial appearance; Brook doesn't watch people agonize over their decisions, or analyze the effect on their psyches. He's interested in a simple calculation: Pam or Claire? A bit of narrative drive may be lost here, but the benefit is that, in the reader's mind, the array of snapshots begins to look less like a handful of individuals not hacking it, and more like a large crowd, unified by its collective screwed-ness. This is important, because it shows people like me that, yes; our circumstances are subject to more than our own ambitions. We've been raised on meritocracy, we young, educated types, and it's tempting to think that the right mix of career and compensation is out there if we just keep at it. Brook is telling us that this isn't so. There are big, socioeconomic factors at play here. We need to look at those.

What Brook was getting at when he asked whether I could buy my parents' house was that things haven't always been this way. There was a time when an American could hold a public-sector job, afford a home in a major city, and stay more or less in the middle class. In fact, he says, during the 1960s "any white man willing to work forty hours a week for forty years could raise a family in a home he owned, in a safe neighborhood with good schools, and receive a lifetime of health care and retirement benefits." That ability was beginning to be extended to women and minorities.

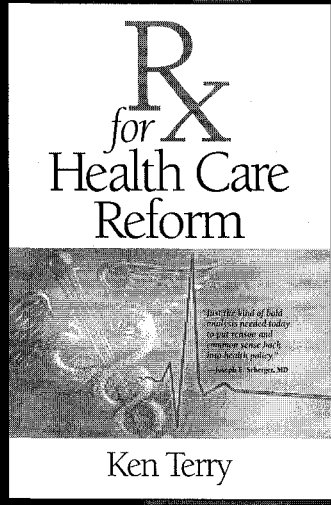
I think Brook probably overstates the extent to which the dilemma he writes about is new, charming us with nostalgic tales like that of the writer who in the '60s "could support herself in the East Village for months on the fee from one mainstream magazine feature." People in my parents' generation also had to weigh career against finance, and vice versa: I can't afford my parents' house, but they couldn't have gotten a place on Park Avenue—in fact, when they bought, their neighborhood was considered quite a hike from Manhattan. Comparisons to previous decades are also complicated by the fact that the number of Americans employed by nonprofits doubled between 1977 and 2001, a much faster growth rate than both the government and for-profit sectors, according to the research group Independent Sector. Some of these do-gooder jobs can't pay less than they used to, because they didn't use to exist—a fact that Brook doesn't note. But Brook is right that the compromises people are making for fulfilling careers are starker, especially in metro areas. There are things middle-class people once took for granted on the bargaining table.

What changed? Brook blames linguistics. Well, not exactly, but he spruces up his inevitable recounting of the rise of the conservative movement, from Buckley to Goldwater to Reagan to George W. Bush, by focusing on the right's appropriation of the word "freedom." Through rote repetition, Brook says, conservatives redefined freedom as the absence of government interventions such as progressive taxation and business regulation. This enabled the right, under Reagan, to slash top tax rates from 70 percent down to 28 percent, and unleash Brook's real bogeyman: inequality.

Too often, Brook argues, inequality is understood as a question of moral fairness, with no practical implications. He quotes writer Mickey Kaus, whom he calls inequality's "apologist-in-chief": "a fat man eating quails while children are begging for bread is a disgusting sight," Kaus says, but "a fat man eating quails while children are eating Bob's Big Boy hamburgers" is less of a problem.

"What Kaus fails to see," Brook writes, "is how a rise in the concentration of wealth reshapes markets, inflating the prices of goods whose supply is fixed, like homes within a reasonable commuting distance of a major city or degrees from top colleges."

As for health care, Brook contends that a high concentration of wealth has led to a high concentration of power, which, in turn, has enabled corporate donors to block the adoption of a universal health plan—exactly the sort of policy that would allow young people to strike out on their own in, say, freelance photography, without worrying about acquiring a budget-busting emergency room bill.



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I called a few economists and other experts to see if Brook was on solid ground with these assertions. Most said he was right on the basics; urban expert Joel Kotkin offered the important caveat that cities are becoming less tenable living places because of inequality, yes, but also because there are *more people* and not enough new cities to put them in. The sharpest disagreement I heard was from Jason Furman of the Brookings Institution, who argued that, while the cost of certain important goods (heath care, housing, education) has indeed gone up over the last thirty years, the cost of other necessities (food, clothing) has dropped, resulting in a near wash for the middle class. I'm not sure, however, that if Brook's argument is taken at its most specific (and in Furman's defense, he hadn't read the book), those facts rebut it. Furman is arguing against the idea of an overall middle-class squeeze; Brook is saying that, in certain important places, the cost of a few basic goods has become *prohibitively* expensive, eliminating an entire segment of middle-class America.

In the 1980s, hordes of talented young people flocked to Wall Street, hoping to get rich quick, but those who wanted to teach could still do so. Today, many young people are interested in public service—both opinion polls and the popularity of programs like the Peace Corps and Teach for America suggest as much. But when it comes time to pay the bills, we go into the corporate world, enduring long, meaningless hours, and often cognitive dissonance, because it's the only sector of the economy that can afford to pay enough for what was formerly considered a middle-class life. "[Y]oung Americans *want* more money because they *need* more money," Brook writes. "Even if they don't covet mansions and luxury cars, they need big bucks for housing, health care, and education. In the 1980s, young people sold out to enjoy a life of luxury; now they sell out to stay afloat."

You probably already know Brook's proposed solution to this problem. He wants America to move in the general direction of a social democracy, with a publicly funded health care system, more money for public schools, and heavily subsidized higher education, all of it paid for by progressive taxation (this would have the added benefit of holding the top tax brackets down and flattening income distribution). You know this, and Brook knows you know it. Thus, his chapter on "Releasing the Trap" is basically a throw-in. The section on fixing the public schools is literally three paragraphs long.

This is fine. Brook isn't providing a blueprint for social reconstruction here; he's diagnosing an emergent condition in American life. And, anyway, the most interesting questions raised by his findings aren't about how to cure the disorder. They're about whether the problem he's focusing on is big enough to warrant drastic intervention, and whether even the people caught in the Trap will see fit to try to release it.

Brook steers clear of slapping any definitive labels on the demographic he's discussing, and thus far I have, too, but look: we're talking for the most part about young liberals from middle-class backgrounds, people who have graduated from fancy schools. I have a bachelor's in sociology from Wesleyan University—basically a four-year degree in "Hey, I've had it pretty good." And I have! If I *really* wanted a pricier place to live, I could probably land a corporate PR job. Is my situation so untenable?

Brook concedes in his introduction that there are plenty of Americans who are worse off than the subjects of his book. But he argues—convincingly, I think—that the situation is more serious than just "the whining of a pampered generation." For one thing, he says, it's bad for society for creative and public service work to be relegated to a cadre of "moral giants, mental midgets, and trust fund babies." If capable accountants are lured away from government jobs into the private sector, there will be no one to catch the Enrons. If no competent lawyer can afford to work as an assistant district attorney, there will be no one to prosecute murders.

More broadly, Brook says, it's not enough that young, educated people have a choice. No healthy society should make people choose between a career in advocacy and quality health care (indeed, America is the only developed country that does). In fact, he writes in the book's angriest moments, what is really being compromised when we make these choices is the very freedom conservatives claimed when they cast "freedom" and "equality" as competing values—the freedom to choose a fulfilling career.

Will all this be enough to rally young liberals in their own defense? Remember that young liberals, like old liberals, have liberal guilt. By this I don't mean that the subjects of Brook's book are so selfless as to be incapable of acting on their own behalf—you should have seen the protests at my school when they banned "chalking" on the sidewalks. I just mean we're not accustomed to the idea that large economic forces are working against us. It's not part of our conditioned understanding of the world.

In this sense, Brook's greatest contribution is not his argument about Big Ideas like freedom and promise, but his simple, central observation: that young, educated people are adversely affected by the new inequality. I know I've been thinking about politics differently since reading *The Trap*—the issues are more personal to me now. And you know what's great? The things I want from my government for myself turn out to be the same things middle- and working-class people all over America yearn for: quality health care and quality education. Maybe the interests of the "liberal elite" aren't so different from those of the average American after all.

Is this convergence of interests an opportunity for change? Brook is optimistic that American freedom can be revived—that the right can't assault the middle class and get away with it. That's what he says in the book, anyway. In person, I have to tell you, he seems less hopeful. As I was nearing the end of *The Trap*, I ran into the author on the street. He asked me how things were going. "Bad," I told him. My car and my computer had both broken down, and I couldn't afford to fix them.

"Well, the first thing you should do is not have a car," he said. "As for the computer, I don't know what to tell you."

He paused.

"Have you considered selling out?" WM

Doron Taussig is senior writer for the *Philadelphia City Paper.*

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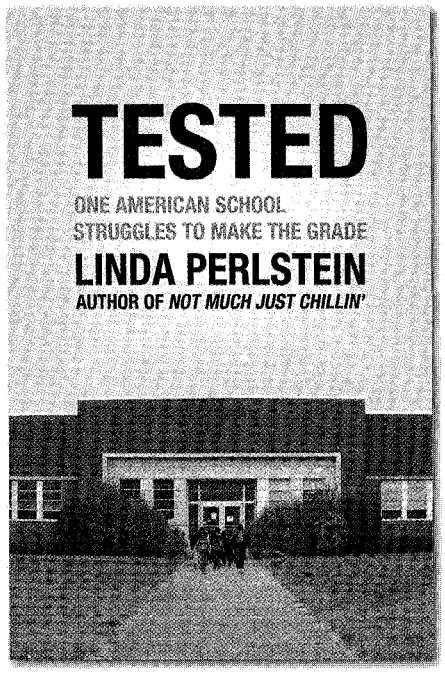
No Complaint Left Behind

An enterprising journalist finds fault in a rare educational success story.

By Kevin Carey



Tested: One American School Struggles to Make the Grade
by Linda Perlstein
Henry Holt and Company, 306 pp.

Of the roughly 170 public elementary schools in Maryland where more than 70 percent of students live in poverty, only three had better test scores last year than Tyler Heights Elementary. A K–5 school built near the low-income housing projects of Annapolis, Tyler more than doubled its pass rates on state reading and math tests in just three years, moving off the list of schools tagged as low-performing by the No Child Left Behind Act. Politicians, school officials, and newspapers like the *Washington Post* held up the school as a "crown jewel"—an example of how NCLB can help even the most disadvantaged children learn.

But Linda Perlstein is not convinced. A former *Washington Post* education reporter and author of a well-regarded book on middle school students, Perlstein spent the entire 2005–06 school year at Tyler Heights. In the resulting book, *Tested: One American School Struggles to Make the Grade*, she argues that, despite the high scores and phenomenal efforts of principal Tina McKnight and her staff, Tyler doesn't represent all that's right about modern American education. Instead, she believes, it shows much of what's wrong.

Tested begins at the end of the previous school year, with McKnight, a veteran educator who pours boundless energy and determination into her job, anxiously awaiting the school's final test scores. They arrive, and they're incredible. Two years before, only 35 percent of third graders were "proficient" in reading. Now—90 percent! But as Tyler's teachers celebrate, they also realize that the scores are a mixed blessing. "They had exactly one year," writes Perlstein, "to prove that this was not a fluke."

This is the central drama of *Tested*, and the intense pressure to match those outsize scores bears down on nearly every action Tyler's faculty takes. As McKnight and her staff—all women, many with only a few years of classroom experience—struggle to adapt to each day's challenges, the oppressive scarcity of time is always on their minds. The March 2006 state test often feels only minutes away.

A clear, vivid writer who combines deep empathy for her subjects with a reporter's skepticism and eye for detail, Perlstein expertly shows just how *complicated* teaching really is. People often see elementary school through the lens of their childhood memories: a relaxed, simple time of playgrounds, primary colors, and the ABCs. In reality, primary education is a highly complex process of simultaneously managing the cognitive, social, and emotional development of hundreds of very diverse young people, each of whom learns in a different way.

This is a hard enough job in schools that serve students from stable, supportive homes. It's exponentially more difficult in schools like Tyler, where impoverished students and non-English speakers are the norm. And as much as she admires the teachers' efforts and acknowledges how far the school has come, Perlstein is troubled by much of what she sees. The teachers are required to use a highly structured, sometimes scripted

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curriculum. Science, art, and social studies are often ignored in favor of the tested subjects, reading and math. And the test prep is relentless—over and over, students practice writing the "brief constructed responses" (short written paragraphs interpreting a text) that feature prominently on the state exam.

Perlstein finds this disturbing, and she should. It is nobody's vision of an ideal education. But the main question to ask—one that animates much of the current NCLB debate—is whether the education that students receive at Tyler is cancer or chemotherapy: is it the disease, or the painful but unavoidable cure? The biggest failure of *Tested* is a refusal to tackle this question head on.

For example, Perlstein drives from Tyler to Crofton Elementary School, located in a wealthy planned community just fourteen miles away. Crofton students spend their days writing in journals, making crafts, studying science and history, and so on. There's little test prep, but nearly every child passes the exam. The contrast is a gross injustice, Perlstein believes. In one of the editorial asides scattered throughout the book—not always to its benefit—she recalls President Bush's denouncement of the "soft bigotry of low expectations" for poor children, before averring that "To condemn them to a rudimentary education in the name of improvement is bigotry too."

But then she immediately explains that, unlike Tyler students, youngsters at Crofton come to school from home environments "rich with logic and analysis, that stimulate the brain and saturate children with learning strategies." They're also less likely to have "brains compromised by prenatal substance abuse, lead poisoning, and malnutrition" and thus have more in the way of "memory, attention span, and motivation." In other words, Crofton doesn't need to create a highly structured environment to make up for the lack of structure at home. It doesn't need to explicitly teach learning and study strategies, because students get those from their parents.

Is Tina McKnight failing her students by not giving them a Crofton-like education? Could she if she wanted to, or is NCLB standing in her way? Perlstein largely sidesteps these questions, never really pressing McKnight on the wisdom of her test-focused approach. And while Perlstein often complains that education lawmakers spend little time in real schools, she provides few concrete recommendations of her own.

If *Tested* aspired to be merely a skillful portrait of life in one American school, those omissions would be forgivable. The book reminds us that schooling is far more difficult and complex than is commonly believed, and it's worth reading for Perlstein's humane, richly detailed descriptions of Tyler's students and teachers alone.

Maybe NCLB is far from perfect, but the improvement in test scores means more than Linda Perlstein would like to believe.

But it wants to be more than that, an indictment of contemporary education policy writ large, and in this it comes up short. The later chapters become an increasingly predictable march through the vicious dilemmas facing high-poverty schools, along with invariably dark descriptions of various educational consultants and alleged profiteers. Teachers in schools like Tyler are often inexperienced and underqualified, but raising teacher standards can shut out talented young educators. The more you teach foundational skills like reading and math, the less you can teach everything else. The more you focus on the lowest-performing students, the less time there is for the gifted. And so on. But rather than exploring solutions to these knotty problems, Perlstein too often cites their existence as *prima facie* evidence that No Child Left Behind is unjust, absurd, or both. By the time the book (inevitably) gets around to noting that President Bush's wastrel brother Neil owns an educational software company, one longs for a return to the Tyler classrooms, where the real education—both for the students and the reader—occurs.

Then, as the book winds down and the end of the school year draws near, Perlstein suddenly takes pains to explain that the tests driving so much of the practices she deplores—the tests Tyler students were failing in droves just a few years ago—are ... kind of easy. And not, perhaps, to be taken so seriously after all. She knows what's coming—despite the tough kids with terrible home lives, the teaching that focused too much on the exam and not enough on the content, Tyler's third graders [Spoiler alert!] score even better than the year before. Is this a good thing? Could the school have produced those results without sacrificing so much else? If so, how? The reader is left to wonder.

But it's worth remembering that there was a time when Tyler Heights Elementary taught low-income students *without* the rules and strictures of NCLB. The products of that era aren't hard to find—many of Tyler's students moved right back into (or stayed in) the projects and had children who are now enrolled at the very same school, children who struggle to learn in the barren day-to-day life of drugs, violence, absent parents, and murdered relatives that Perlstein describes with such wrenching clarity.

There are many reasons for this most commonplace of American tragedies, and most of them had nothing to do with school. But school didn't help—or didn't help enough. And in Tina McKnight's words, "There wasn't anybody pushing Tyler Heights to be anything more than what it was." To their credit, the authors of NCLB tried to give schools that push, and educators like McKnight responded. The vast majority of students at Tyler, by mastering the basics of reading and math, may have grasped the first rung on the ladder that could allow them to escape their unpromising life circumstances. Maybe NCLB is far from perfect, but the improvement in test scores at Tyler means more than Linda Perlstein would like to believe. The ability to recognize this is the one test that *Tested*, for all its virtues, doesn't pass. WM

Kevin Carey is the research and policy manager at Education Sector, an independent, nonpartisan think tank.

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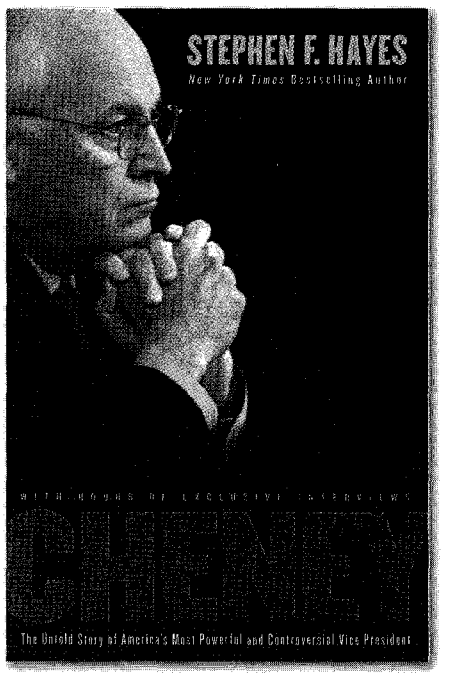
Sorry, That's Classified

Even Cheney's pliant hagiographer can't find the vice president's inner human.

By Jamie Malanowski



Cheney: The Untold Story of America's Most Powerful and Controversial Vice President

by Stephen F. Hayes
HarperCollins, 304 pp.

Prognostication is a fool's game, but I would bet the farm that in 2009 and 2010, the best-seller lists will be frequently crowned by tell-all books about the Bush presidency. The administration's fervor for secrecy has ensured that there will be a large inventory of stories for the newly loose-lipped to share. More importantly, the debacle in Iraq and what is certain to be its long tail of repercussions ensures that there will be plenty of people with reputations to salvage who will zealously sidestep responsibility and aim to pin the tail on the most convenient and credible donkey in the corral. Perhaps this donkey will be President Bush; it would certainly make for riveting reading if we were to learn that behind his mask of peevish irritation, there was actually a thoughtful leader who was decisively trapping us in a quagmire from which there is no easy escape.

But that is not the smart way to bet. Clearly the superbly credentialed group of grown-ups who steered Bush onto the shoals will have to pay the price for their miscalculations. (In the documentary *Iraq: No End in Sight*, nothing is so damaging to the reputation of Donald Rumsfeld as the simple replays of his arrogantly preening performances at press conferences.) After the hard landings that lately have been suffered by Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and Libby, it's certain that before long Dick Cheney will have his turn being roasted on the gridiron (and I do mean *on* the gridiron—decidedly not *at*). Like Bob Haldeman and Don Regan and John Sununu and other famously hard men of administrations past who threw their weight around, Cheney will find that the bigger you are, the harder you fall.

Which should make Cheney very grateful for the thin pillow that *Weekly Standard* senior writer Stephen F. Hayes has handed him in his new biography of the vice president, *Cheney: The Untold Story of America's Most Powerful and Controversial Vice President*. The kindest thing one can say about this book is that it deserves to be the official biography for the 2008 Cheney presidential campaign that never will be. (You know, the campaign where the nation implores Cheney to take off his fishing waders and, like Cincinnatus, preserve the republic.) The book gives you a thorough survey of the topography of Cheney country, from his days on the high school football team to his time in the White House, and the secret microphone in Bush's ear through which Cheney communicates his decisions. (I wish.) But as any Wyoming man like Cheney will tell you, topography is only *so* interesting; what's more valuable is what lies beneath.

Apart from a starstruck biography of Johnny Unitas that I read when I was in grade school, it's hard to remember a life story more bereft of psychology than this one. We all know there are Trappists who are gabbier than Cheney, so one can hardly fault Hayes for failing to get explanations from the horse's mouth, even though Hayes was blessed with hours of personal interviews. But the failure to find the story within the man makes this book a less-than-captivating read. It's fun to satirize Cheney as the snarling, secretive, shotgun-wielding neocon autocrat who knows where the bodies are buried—because he's buried most of them—but that's not a caricature that would have been recognizable for most of Cheney's career. Cheney was a Jerry Ford Republican, a Bob Michel man of the House, a defense secretary who cut a low profile as a competent team player. If Cheney is indeed the most powerful and controversial vice president in our history—and who else is a contender?—then how and why he earned

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those adjectives deserves exploration.

Hayes just doesn't give it to us. There are lots of facts, but not much insight. He does, for example, give us good information about a young, hell-raising Cheney who fails out of Yale and comes close to settling himself into a life of blue-collar labor, but when it comes to explaining the fears and embarrassments that must have preceded the application of Cheney's nose to the grindstone, we are presented with the simple words "Lynne Cheney," which seems more of a starting point than a wrap-up. Similarly, Hayes chronicles Cheney's rapid rise up through and into the leadership of the House of Representatives, where he gains the respect of colleagues on both sides of the aisle. Later, however, Hayes depicts Cheney as one of the foremost proponents of restoring power to the executive. It's not that this circle can't be squared, but Hayes fails to connect any human faces to the evolution of Cheney's thinking. We know that there is a human lurking inside Dick Cheney—Dick "Big Time" Cheney; Dick "Go fuck yourself, Leahy" Cheney—but Hayes never gets to the heart of it.

Consider the section that covers Cheney's selection as Bush's running mate. It's a brief account that covers Bush's request that Cheney head the selection committee, and a one-paragraph description of the document- and memo-heavy review process. It includes Bush's awkward and self-satisfied statement to Hayes that "As he ... gave me briefings on his Vice Presidential searching, I was really in my own mind interviewing him—he just didn't know it." It concludes with Bush's offer and Cheney's agreement, which was "influenced by two factors: a sense of duty and a growing belief that he was the least worst option."

Think about what this account doesn't include. Recall that at this moment Cheney has known George W. for at least a dozen years, including those years of the Bush 41 presidency when Cheney was the highly respected defense secretary and W. was a vain and under-directed princeling. (See the unforgettable cameos of W. during this period in Richard Ben Cramer's *What It Takes*.) Recall that Cheney had not long before had enough self-regard to offer himself to the nation as a presidential possibility, and saw that offer as thoroughly ignored as if it had gone unspoken. Consider that about six months later (as we know from articles in the *Washington Post* that appeared as Hayes's book was being published), after Cheney was sworn in, former VP Dan Quayle described the life of fund-raising and funeral attending that Cheney could expect, and Cheney responded, "I have a different understanding with the president."

Think about these things, and maybe you, too, will conclude that the self-deprecatory line about "the least worst option" reeks of falseness, and that the line "I was really interviewing him" seems self-delusional, and that Hayes's entire description comes across as credulous, unknowing, and uninquisitive.

Such superficiality characterizes the whole book, including the most important elements—the 9/11 attacks, the subsequent wars. Hayes shows us Cheney moving on- and offstage, making statements and arguing positions. It's not quite enough. Cheney has been one of the Iraq War's lead prosecutors, the man most willing to tie Saddam to al-Qaeda, to accept the existence of weapons of mass destruction, to believe that Iraqi resistance was "in its last throes." Cheney was also an important backer of Rumsfeld's leadership at the Defense Department, where he blithely and ignorantly made or signed off on a series of fateful decisions that ruined whatever chance the United States had of achieving a fairly antiseptic regime change. (Indeed, Cheney continued to encourage Bush to retain Rumsfeld after the disastrous 2006 elections.)

These positions call into question the very *raison d'etre* of Dick Cheney. He's supposed to be the guy who has more experience, sounder judgment, and a steadier hand than anybody else in government. Instead, it looks as though he's just a lethal infighter who is as apt to jump to conclusions, and as driven by emotions like loyalty as—well, as a Democrat.

Cheney is a gigantic figure in these times, a powerful figure to contemplate in terms of the uses and limits of power. We're going to need a better book than this one to understand him. WM

Jamie Malanowski is managing editor of *Playboy*. His most recent book is *The Coup*, a novel, published by Doubleday in July.

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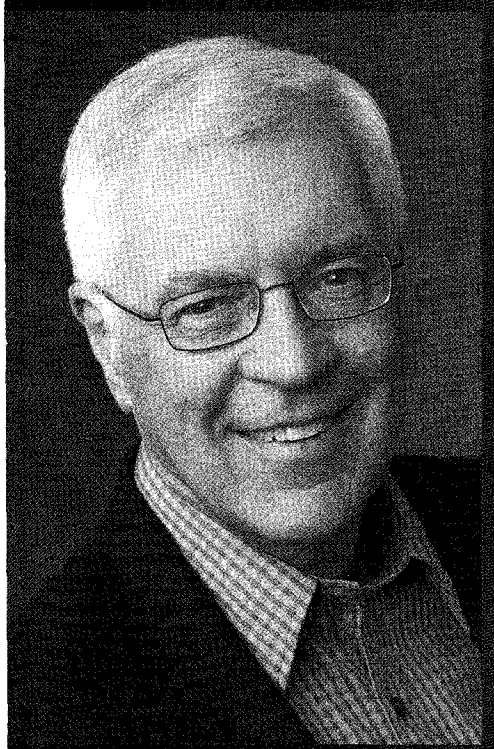

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